

City regions, regional governance and the Northern Way

In the last two years, the Government has been revising sub-national governance mechanisms. What is emerging is a greater interest in the sub-regional scale, particularly with so-called 'city regions' and their role in economic development. This article explains this current interest in city regions in the context of the Northern Way and argues that more attention should be paid to issues of sustainability and social inclusion when planning at this new level.



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In Yorkshire and the Humber and in northern England more generally, the city region agenda has been promoted not only by central government but also by the Northern Way, a pan-northern governance partnership.

The New Labour 'project' had been to devolve political responsibility to regions in the belief that this would bring economic dividends and would benefit the most deprived regions. In England, this has partly materialised through the establishment of regional development agencies (RDAs) in

1998 and since then, the regional governance arena has broadened to become a rather confusing maze of organisations some of whose accountability is dubious. Regional assemblies were in part established to simplify this confusing picture, the aim being to reassemble these bodies under a democratically elected regional government who would have autonomy over certain functions.

With the rejection of an elected Regional Assembly in the North East in November 2004, the Government has started revising the role of regions as a strategic policy arena. The Communities and Local Government Parliamentary Committee is currently carrying out an enquiry into the 'future of regional government' and the Treasury, for its part, is undertaking a review of sub-national economic development and regeneration bodies. The results of these reviews will feed into the Comprehensive Spending Review due in 2007 which might see changes in the allocation of public money to regions.

What are city regions?

As the strategic focus on regions is losing ground, the city region is emerging as a new policy scale. Marvin *et al.* (2006, p.5) define city regions as "enlarged territories from which core urban areas draw people for work and services such as shopping, education, health, leisure and entertainment. The city regional scale also plays a significant role for business in organising supply chains and accessing producer services. The city region is therefore an important functional entity".

As a functional concept, city regions are related to travel-to-work areas and therefore may transcend administrative boundaries. The strategic importance of city regions has been advocated by the 'core cities', a group which unites the biggest English local authorities outside London in a call to central government to pay more attention to big cities.

The 1990s saw an urban renaissance in many English cities, particularly in the north, but the core cities argue that, after investment in urban design, more emphasis needs to be put

now on economic development in cities. English cities argue this group has been too long considered an economic liability and need to be re-imagined as engines of the British economy. Central government has seen in this new (mostly northern) urban impetus a possibility of performing its commitment to reducing regional disparities.

In the North, this agenda has been more clearly defined through the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) initiative of the *Northern Way*, which has already identified three city regions within Yorkshire and the Humber: Leeds, Sheffield and Hull and Humberside as well as another five across the North West and the North East.

Where does the Northern Way fit in?

The emergence of the *Northern Way* concept in February 2004 needs to be contextualised in a previous phase when the Government, and John Prescott in particular, were more interested in the regional devolution project. The *Northern Way* was the counterpart to the Thames Gateway growth plan and was born with the objective to reduce in 20 years the £30 billion output gap between the North and average England. It was also addressed at refocusing a culture of state assistance and managing decline towards an emphasis on growth.

Although the *Northern Way* was devised by central government, it was always meant to be a multi-level governance partnership led by the RDAs but involving officers and representatives from central government departments, regional bodies and local authorities as well as members from the private sector and public-private partnerships (e.g. English Partnerships).

From its outset, the RDAs established that the *Northern Way* would not be a new institutional layer of governance but it would create a "greater impact by doing important things together across the North" (Northern Way Steering Group, 2005, p.7).

As such, it focuses on three things: collaboration between regional partners, influence over central government about specific measures for the North; and the production of evidence to justify government investment in the North. So far it has only been allocated £100 million for over three years (50 per cent from the northern RDAs and 50 per cent from central government) which is clearly not enough to bridge a £30 billion gap in 20 years.

Moreover, the Government has already announced that it will not renew this funding after the first three years which would leave the *Northern Way* solely dependant on RDA funding. But, as the *Northern Way* documents and representatives have repeatedly argued, the strategy is to focus on the £100 billion that the Government already spends collectively in the North through mainstream funding.

The *Northern Way's* objective is to provide evidence and assert influence over the best way to spend this public money and eventually also lobby for strategic investments across the North. It has appropriately identified ten priorities on where to concentrate investment in order to reduce the output gap. Yorkshire Forward has taken the leadership over the transport priorities, seen by many as the most important initiative within the strategy.

An additional building block for the *Northern Way* has been the identification of eight city regions. Although initially the *Northern Way* only identified the five northern core cities as the main spatial focus (Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool and Newcastle), three other cities were added later. This addition reflected political tensions and the difficulties for the *Northern Way* partnership to prioritise and establish a clear spatial hierarchy in the North.

What are the city regions?

In 2005, the *Northern Way* partnership commissioned each of the eight city regions across the North to write a City Region Development Programme (CRDP) with the aim of identifying how each would contribute to the reduction of the output gap. This is an innovative initiative as the geographical remit of the strategy did not neatly match existing administrative bodies, like sub-regional partnerships.

The first questions were, therefore, what were the city-regions and who would write these economic CRDPs. The identified city regions were 'given' by the *Northern Way* a geographical remit which was based on a combination of travel-to-work data, previously existing collaboration and political sensibilities. The justification and evidence base for each of the city regions varies and this has been reflected in the uneven progress made so far in the CRDPs. In the case of the northern five core cities, there was already a conviction that it was necessary to go beyond the administrative boundaries of the central city to acknowledge the functional relations amongst urban centres within a conurbation.

Already, by 1999, the core cities group had commissioned a study of the interaction between cities and their regions and, in 2003, all core cities presented a prospectus to central government that took a city regional approach. As a continuation of this work Leeds, for example, signed in March 2005 a concordat of collaboration of 11 local authorities and districts.

Most of the pre-*Northern Way* city-regional work was around the old metropolitan county boundaries and did not necessarily involve strategic thinking about issues of economic development at this scale. The *Northern Way* has pushed these geographical and thematic boundaries, identifying wider city regions that represent the footprint of existing economic flows between cities, particularly acknowledging their travel-to-work patterns; a fluid geography that does not fit neatly into existing sub-regional administrative boundaries.

The *Northern Way* has been keen to depict these city regions as fuzzy and fluid economic entities as opposed to allegedly rigid and arbitrary political ones. This is reflected in the *Northern Way's* so-called 'purple map' where eight slightly darker blobs without defined boundaries are recognized as the city regions. The map makes it impossible to identify which local authorities make up the city regions.

This portrayed fuzziness, however, contrasts with two issues. First, the fact that so far there is no other way to practically define city regions than around local authority boundaries. In fact, the responsibility to write CRDPs has fallen to existing local authorities or sub-regional bodies which are inevitably geographically bounded. This process has varied across the three regions. In Leeds, the CRDP is mainly led by Leeds City Council while in Manchester it is coordinated by Manchester Enterprises, its economic development agency).

Secondly, although city regions are promoted by the *Northern Way* as fluid and mobile entities, in fact the initial geographical remit for the writing of CRDPs did not allow for any overlaps (Figure 1a) minimising any political conflict. During the writing process the city regions themselves have expanded this remit reflecting wider linkages but also responding to political pressures (Figure 1b).

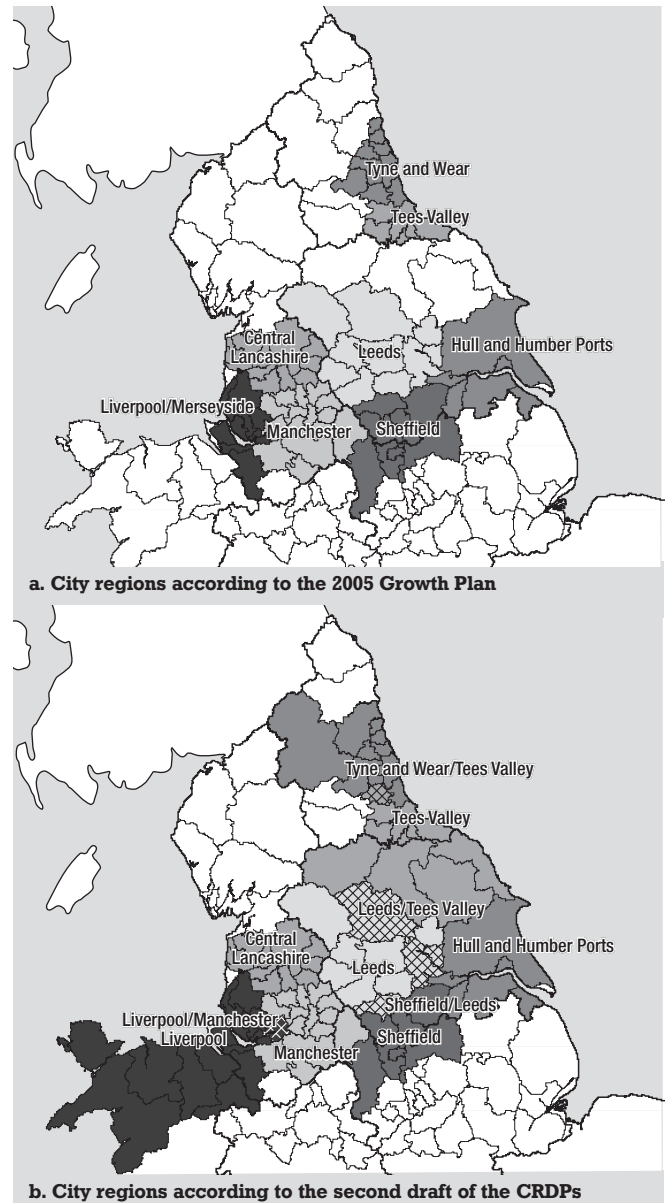


Figure 1. Alternative definitions of Northern Way city regions

The identification of the eight *Northern Way* city regions and the geographical make up of these has followed a similar pattern of initial spatial selectivity but subsequent expansion to meet political compromises and reflect socio-political relationships between local authorities. Far from being 'natural geographies' that reflect fluid economic geographies, city regions are inevitably policy and political constructs embedded in existing institutional mechanisms.

It is difficult to know whether this new spatial scale will be able to find a political space. Central government is actively promoting it but regionally it has not replaced previous spatial approaches. The situation today is therefore relatively confusing. The boundaries of the city regions do not coincide with the existing sub-regions which are the current structures that Yorkshire Forward works around. Furthermore, the Regional

Spatial Strategy has identified seven sub-areas (Wood, 2006) different from sub-regions or city regions. There is uncertainty as to whether the city region model will eventually replace the sub-regional one and how the large rural areas will be linked in. The five key cities collaboration initiative is also being reassessed. Local authorities prepared business cases for the city regions for the Minister for Local Government and are now preparing a second round of the CRDPs.

What are city regions for?

What could the city region do that current government arrangements do not? What are city regions for? So far, the city region agenda has been driven forward by think tank reports and ministerial statements but there is little debate as to what benefits this new spatial focus would bring.

Some have suggested that the city region is a concept in search of an agenda. If the regional devolution agenda was about regional disparities and the city regions are somewhat taking over, they would have some responsibility over this matter. There seems to be at least three different agendas currently trying to attach themselves to the city region scale, none of which make reducing disparities its main objective.

There is an *economic agenda*, which we have seen above and is defended by the core cities, which suggests that the UK is lagging behind European competitors because of its economic over-dependence on a "sole cylinder" (London) and that more "cylinders should be added to the UK's economy" (Core Cities Working Group, 2003).

A *political agenda* suggests that, following London's successful devolution, other big English city regions should also be able to acquire similar political autonomy including the appointment of city region mayors. City regions would be the appropriate level at which to make decisions.

Finally, there is a *spatial planning* agenda which emphasises the advantages of "relational planning" (Healey, 2006), the added value of planning beyond strict municipal boundaries, building shared territorial visions, and promoting balanced polycentric city regions where commuter trips are reduced.

This last agenda has not been mobilised sufficiently in the city regional agenda and is often used as a justification to argue for political devolution or economic competitiveness. However, this might be the more practical advantage of city regions and the one that could have a broader remit beyond the narrowly defined economic focus.

Beyond the sole economic focus

The *Northern Way* and the CRDPs so far have been overwhelmingly focused on economic growth. As Goodchild and Hickman (2006, p. 126) have put it, "growth is [in the *Northern Way*] simply assumed as desirable". The strong focus on economic growth and competitiveness is complemented by a light touch on the environment and passing concern for issues of social cohesion and inclusion.

A consultancy report commissioned by the *Northern Way* concluded that the CRDPs had not considered sustainable development in the first round and were unlikely to do it in second round due to lack of time and unclear messages from the Secretariat (CAG Consultants, 2006). Accordingly the *Northern Way* and the city regions have not engaged with community groups or the third sector in the same way it has engaged with businesses.

In this sense, the *Northern Way* represents an example of those policy approaches which view sustainability as something which is addressed once the economy has been 'fixed' (Morgan, 2006). Such an approach eschews the view that the achievement of sustainable development and social justice

requires these concerns to be at the heart of an economic strategy rather than seen as by-products.

If the city regions were to be the new scale for resolving the output gap and tackling pan-northern issues, more emphasis should be placed on the relationships and linkages between these city regions and the areas that fall outside them. As Midgley *et al.* (2005, p. 3) have shown, the rural areas both within and outside the defined city regions are interconnected with the urban areas and therefore spatial initiatives such as the *Northern Way* would benefit from a more "holistic form of territorial development, which assesses the nature of interconnections between rural and urban areas, and seek to manage and develop these to the maximum mutual benefit". So far, the CRDPs have not placed enough emphasis on the relationships between the city regions and how or if they complement each other.

Conclusion

Although discussion has been ongoing about the most appropriate scale to design and implement public policy, attention should also be focused on the kind of political project that is to be implemented at any one scale or indeed across scales. Recently a conference in Birmingham asked: If a city region is the answer, what's the question? This is a pertinent question. There are already few policy agendas that have seen in the city region a new political space to fill.

This new geographical scale could provide a chance for local elites to reshuffle and align around new interests. So far, none of the existing arguments that advocate the city region are explicitly addressing issues of sustainable development, regional disparities or social inclusion for that matter. This does not mean that the city region scale cannot be furnished with these preoccupations but the debate needs to be broadened beyond economic growth and competitiveness. Accordingly, it needs to be acknowledged that city regions are not just the footprint of economic flows but socio-political entities as well.

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