The impact of regionalisation on rural development in England

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Abstract

Across the globe decentralising power from the nation state to 'lower' tiers of government is widely regarded as positive, enabling decisions to be made 'closer to the people' and to enhance co-ordination. This paper seeks to highlight the implications for rural development of the transfer of powers and competencies from the national state to a regional tier in England between 1997 and 2010. A Foucauldian inspired discourse analysis shows how regionalisation has eclipsed rural policy. It has also impacted on capacity building and work to facilitate wider participation in rural development at the local level, long recognised by researchers as critical aspects of successful rural development.

Previous studies have emphasised the contrast between the rhetoric of devolution and the extent to which the state retains control by extending its power to the devolved scale. Discourses reveal patterns of power relations and can tell us how and why groups of actors take different approaches. Through combining the contrasting notions of devolution and centralisation, a discourse framework is proposed of four discourses of the region. Non-government actors express their choices to 'buy into' the regional discourse, make the best of, or resist the transformations set in train by regionalism, highlighting the complex power relations at work.

The discourses reveal that state sponsored regionalism has had far reaching consequences for rural affairs. The research found differences between English regions and between regional government agencies, as a consequence of devolution. Nevertheless, the discursive practices centre on realising state plans. Furthermore, regionalisation restricts the choices available to the local level, and local plans have been formulated on the basis of a generic, homogenous territory, marking a fundamental change from previous territorial rural programmes.

Key words: Regions, rural development, England, governance

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Historically, England has had little tradition of regional government, being governed at the national tier and by local government. Rural 'shire' counties (York*shire*, Lincoln*shire*, Wilt*shire* for example) are a significant element in the identity as well as the governance of rural England. Between 1997 and 2010 Labour governments implemented a series of regionalisation reforms to devolve power to an intermediate tier of regions. The policy and institutional changes that took place 'utterly transformed the structures and institutions of rural policy' (Goodwin, 2008, p45). In this paper, I illustrate the changes of regionalisation through a discourse analysis, and reflect on the impacts for rural development, focusing on the regional and local scale.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section outlines the transfer of powers, and the institutions and governance established in the regions. Second, I present a discourse analysis, contrasting the notions of centralisation and devolution, and third, the responses of actors to those regionalising discourses. Finally, I review how regionalisation has altered the practices and networks of rural policy practitioners and had consequences for rural development policy.

English regionalism

A regional tier of government has had a long period of gestation in the sphere of economic policy. Post-war regional policy was understood as a need to redistribute economic activity, to redress the balance between the prosperous south of England and the ailing north. For Labour governments there was an electoral imperative to respond to their voters, concentrated as they were in the north, and a similar imperative to devolve powers to Scotland and Wales. Key individuals in the Labour Party believed that devolution should also apply to English regions. As Bogdanor notes, devolution involves the transfer of powers to a 'subordinate elected body' (2001, p2). The Labour Party had an intention in 1997 to allow people 'region by region to decide in a referendum whether they want[ed] directly elected regional government' (Labour Party, 1997, p377). Voters rejected regional government in a referendum held in the

North East in 2004, which effectively put an end to the democratic element of their regionalism project. Instead, between 1997 and 2010 England had a series of unelected regional institutions with powers derived directly from the UK state. The two principal institutions with devolved rural development tasks were Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies.

Government Offices

A need to co-ordinate government drove the initial creation of Government Offices in each of the regions (Winter, 2006). First established in 1994, the Government Offices grew rapidly in terms of personnel and areas of responsibility in the 2000s. The Government Offices enabled the state to implement policies and programmes from a wide range of government departments in ways which, depending on perspective, allowed for tailoring to regional circumstance or the more effective extension of central government control. The Government Offices rapidly evolved to fulfil a further administrative purpose - creating a conduit through which the central state gathered information on the social, economic and environmental condition of the regions. The Government Office network also formed a convenient way to deliver major European programmes to fit with a wider European regional structure, including Objective 5b and Leader programmes.

Government Offices were tasked with drafting a regional rural plan, or Framework, and establishing governance by Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). The Government Offices initiated a forum on rural affairs for each region to deliver intelligence to central government on what was happening 'on the ground'. 'Rural Affairs Forums' were announced in the English Rural White Paper 2000. The narrative of government at that time was that there was a need to 'listen to the rural voice', (Woods, 2008). For over a decade the activities of governance, drafting and overseeing plans helped to define the region as the scale at which to identify and tackle 'rural problems'.

Regional Development Agencies

Established in 1999, the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were seen

as the primary means of promoting economic development appropriate to that region. The Regional Development Agencies had a common mission statement 'to transform England's regions through sustainable economic development'. They had considerable financial resources at their disposal to achieve this mission. In the financial year 2009/2010 total Regional Development Agency funding was £2,260 million. Allocations to each Regional Development Agency differed markedly with the North West Development Agency receiving £398 million while the East of England Development Agency budget was less than half this at £136 million (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010). Multiple national government departments contributed to Regional Development Agency budgets. These contributions were pooled together to make up a 'single pot' over which individual Regional Development Agencies had considerable autonomy in investment decisions. In addition to their financial power Regional Development Agencies also defined Regional Economic Strategies designed to provide a strategic overview of the economic situation of the region and to guide regeneration in both urban and rural areas.

Each of the Regional Development Agencies, with the exception of London, had a rural team from their inception. These teams were initially created through the transfer of regeneration functions and staff from the Rural Development Commission. The rural remit of the Agencies grew steadily over the 1999 to 2010 period (Woods, 2008). Most significantly in terms of rural development, Regional Development Agencies took on key funding streams of the EU's Rural Development Regulation 2007-2013, enacted in England in as the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) devolved responsibility for the economic and social measures in the programme including the Leader approach. The RDPE budget for the Regional Development Agencies was set at £536m. Individual Agencies were allocated total budgets ranging from £48m in the North East to £102m in the South West region (Defra, 2008).

The scale of investment made by the RDAs, accompanied by a high degree of autonomy, meant that they were always politically contentious. The

Conservative Party persistently criticised them on the basis of value for money and lack of democratic accountability. A new coalition Government in May 2010 quickly announced the closure of Regional Development Agencies by 2012. In a more surprising move, given that the Government Offices were 'branches' of central government set up originally by a Conservative Government, the coalition also announced its intention to abolish them. The rhetoric of change included a desire to devolve to the local rather than a regional level, as well as making spending savings. As the offices are dismantled, it seems likely that some regional teams will remain, carrying out tasks on behalf of Whitehall departments, including managing European structural funds, though Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) is resuming responsibility for administering the RDPE funds formerly devolved to Regional Development Agencies.

Map 1: The English regions

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Discourses of regionalisation

Regionalisation transformed the way in which some policies and programmes were delivered in England from the mid 1990s until 2010. My research sought to uncover the impact on rural development, focusing on the regional and local scales. The field work consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews with key local and regional actors in two English regions – the North West and East of England (Map1) – supplemented with observation of regional rural meetings and events. The data was analysed using a Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Studies have questioned the extent to which the state retains control, despite devolution, by extending its power and influence to the regional scale, or alternatively the extent to which the state devolves control away from the national state to devolved governance structures (Murdoch and Abram 1998, Jones and Little 2000, Edwards et al, 2001, Gibbs and Jonas, 2001, Convery et al, 2010). The rhetoric of devolution and the tendency to centralise are two contrasting perspectives. The principal rural development policy activities of the regional tier have been drafting and implementing plans, including allocating resources, and managing governance. The two devolution perspectives combined with the two devolution tasks identify four discourses of the region (Table1).

The two devolved discourses of 'participatory development' and 'participatory regionalism' suggest broad participation in governance by actors from throughout the region and hence the epithet of participatory. Participatory governance was most in evidence in the North West, compared to regional structures in the East of England. Governance in the two regionalised discourses, 'administrative regionalism' and 'regional autonomy' is limited to government actors from the regional tier. Consistent policy content describes discourses where national policy is paramount, such as in the rural Frameworks, whereas distinctiveness implies greater degrees of regional choice and divergence of regional plans, exemplified by the RDPE regional plans. This section summarises the story lines and metaphors of each discourse.

Table 1: Four discourses of the region

Discourse	Governance -		Regional Plans -		Metaphors
Participatory Development	Devolved	Regional partners make decisions in collaboration with local partners	Distinctive	...reflect the priorities of our sub-regions	Collaboration Network of networks A regions of sub-regions
Administrative Regionalism	Regionalised	Regional managers make decisions on behalf of the region	Consistent	...deliver national policy	Government as hierarchy of national and regional tiers The region as one entity
Participatory Regionalism	Devolved	Regional and sub-regional partners collaborate to deliver rural development	Consistent	...deliver national policy	Government as hierarchy of national, regional and sub-regional scales. Collaboration on delivery A region of sub-regions
Regional Autonomy	Regionalised	Regional government leaders take decisions for their region	Distinctive	...set out our priorities for the region	Autonomous Independent Regionalised The Region as one entity

Participatory Development

In the participatory development discourse the regional state actors build partnerships which promote participation and collaboration, illustrated by the North West case study. The North West Rural Affairs Forum was initially established by Government Office-NW in cooperation with NW-Development Agency and others ahead of the national requirement for a Rural Affairs Forum. The early establishment and an enthusiasm to encourage a broad membership indicates that the Rural Affairs Forum was created in line with a devolved approach. The North West Rural Affairs Forum was valued by the regional leaders as 'a general network for communication and information sharing' (NW:13C). The metaphor of a network suggests decentralised governance made up of multiple, connected and interacting participants. In addition to the Rural Affairs Forum , the North West partners, led by Government Office-North West as part of their rural leadership role, set up a Rural Strategic Group.

> When we set up the Rural Strategic Group we deliberately created five seats for the sub-regions... we've got the Rural Strategic Group doing the strategy, we've got the task and finish sub-groups doing the operational delivery, and we've got the Forum doing the stakeholder engagement. (NW:13C)

Diversity and inclusive engagement was part of the regional discourse, and comprised of a network of sub-regions inter-linked by multiple connections, combining to construct an entity of the North West.

In 'participatory development', policy content is distinctive. The RDPE regional plans showed a considerable degree of divergence, despite significant national and EU constraints. A major reason in the case of the North West plan was the devolved policy making practices adopted.

> We've adopted the subsidiarity approach with RDPE... What my predecessor did in the development process, is go out there and say to the partners 'what do you want to do with us?' which is quite laudable in many ways. (NW:10C)

Sub-groups worked on county-level plans. A significant divergence of the North West plan was the greater use of the Leader-approach than other regions. The regional plan allocated over 7% of the Axis 1 budget to the Leader-approach compared to nil or 1% in most other regions, except for the South East (4.6%). A commitment to community-led rural development of

Leader was consistent with the devolved, participatory values of the discourse.

The metaphors of collaboration and networks form the participative story line, drawing in those with an interest in and affected by, the activities. The metaphors of collaboration and a 'region of sub-regions' meant that regional plans were produced by members of the discourse coalition working 'in partnership' to reflect the priorities of the sub-regions. The formal structures, broad membership, and the independent nature of the Rural Affairs Forum built a narrative of participation in the North West through networked governance. The lead players could claim to have made Defra's policy of "devolving power, resources and responsibility" a reality.

Administrative regionalism
In the field of environmental policy, Dryzek (2005) defined a discourse of 'administrative rationalism', or 'leave it to the experts', as a discourse of solving problems through professional, bureaucratic structures. The same general characteristics define 'administrative regionalism'. The dominant story line is of a hierarchical state where the regional tier is subservient to the national state, and governing is an administrative task. The role of regions was to administer national policy, as Dryzek says through 'rational management in the service of a clearly defined public interest, informed by the best available expertise' (Dryzek, 2005, p87).

Preparation of the East of England plans and governance arrangements typify administrative regionalism. The tasks to prepare the regional plans required by Defra were technical ones, to lead and oversee their progress, consistent with a metaphor of hierarchical government. GOs were depicted as part of the institutional structure of Whitehall and staff accepted the hierarchy and expert manager metaphors of administrative regionalism. The regional managers led the drafting of consultation documents, and planned and organised the consultation. The interviewees described their actions in rational and logical terms. As such they were not concerned with examining and making complex

policy choices within the region, but only with how to make government policy a reality in their region.

Governance has become such an accepted part of the democratic programme of government, that the administrative regionalism discourse, despite its technical character, had to accommodate governance. In the East of England example of administrative regionalism, expert managers tackled the requirement for governance through constructing structures that informed their technical tasks. In this case 'governance' meant inviting comments from 'stakeholders' who were endowed with their own expertise by virtue of their membership or position, for example as an officer or representative of a 'rural body'. The stakeholders were chosen by the lead regional actors, in contrast to the open, inclusive approach in the North West.

The role of stakeholders was to give feedback so that the regional experts could understand the impact of their policy actions, and potentially, make adjustments. However, stakeholders could only influence decision making by engaging as experts themselves, as the Government Office-East interviewee said concerning tensions in East of England Rural Affairs Forum meetings.

> Where people are so infrequently engaged and don't fully understand what things it can do and can't do, they will be looking to fetch up quite parochial things. (EE:1C)

Rural Affairs Forum members were expected to appreciate the context set by the managers and to present issues at the quarterly meetings that qualified as regional ones, rather than local concerns. The techniques of bureaucracy limited and controlled the scope of the Rural Affairs Forum to challenge and question the experts. Nevertheless, the Rural Affairs Forum was very significant to the regional bodies in the East of England, as regional forums were an integral part of Defra's programme of devolution.

Participatory Regionalism
The Rural Strategy 2004 reflects the storylines of participatory regionalism. Success for rural areas according to the Strategy, lay in working together on a "customer-focused" agenda and enabling customers to "have a voice". Devolution was presented as a pluralist project, where "delivery partners"

engaged in a single enterprise of meeting customer need through exercising devolved powers. Production of the North West rural framework serves to illustrate 'participatory regionalism', combining devolved governance with consistent policy content.

The regional interviewees portrayed the story of preparing the North West rural framework as a collaborative one, with Government Office-North West playing a leadership role. This involved framing the task by presupposing that policy content was the preserve of national government.

> We kicked it off by having a workshop basically around it. I think, no, there wasn't a lot of disagreement around what we needed to do, and there was good commitment to actually getting on and doing it. (NW:13C)

The focus of discussion was on the practical matters of how to 'join-up' the activity of the delivery bodies to achieve the aims of the Rural Strategy, rather than on policy discussions. The task was seen as a practical, problem solving exercise, tackled by organising rational debate and down to earth collaboration. A wide range of actors took part in the collaborative discussions which emphasised 'action' rather than idealistic policy debates.

The regional government players were 'in the middle', balancing national and local requirements as a North West Government Office manager said of the rural framework.

> The way we did that was trying to strike this balance between us providing a bit of leadership but not doing everything. Maybe getting the delivery bodies to own the tasks and do things. (NW:13C)

For him, 'delivery bodies' included non government partners, unlike in the 'administrative regionalism' example from the East of England. Debate was focused on action rather than alternative policy directions so that the Government Office staff maintained a policy stance consistent with national plans and, at the same time led a participatory approach. Broad, inclusive engagement which acknowledged sub-regions and the local, was designed to build a partnership which took charge of delivery.

The importance of establishing the right devolved governance structures to take forward the regional rural work was consistently stressed by North West

interviewees. Participation conferred responsibilities on the governance members to deliver plans, as well as getting involved in their production. The governance structure institutionalised the involvement of a wide range of rural interests who were cast as having a stake in the region. Governance drew in the 'stakeholders' who, through taking part in sub-groups, events and consultations, helped to construct the rural region as diverse and collaborative.

Regional Autonomy

'Regional autonomy' shares a regionalised governance structure with 'administrative regionalism' and distinctive policy content with 'participatory development'. 'Regional autonomy' evokes a picture of a self-governing region in charge of its own rural affairs. Clearly, that extent of independence did not exist in the English regions. However, a regional autonomy discourse was evident in many of the characteristics of the Regional Development Agencies' roles managing the socio-economic elements of the RDPE.

The plans for each region were distinctive. The mission of the Regional Development Agencies was to transform the economy of their region. Thus it is not surprising that the East of England Development Agency interviewee stressed the overriding importance of the Regional Economic Strategy (RES) in defining the priorities in their RDPE Plan.

> The RES was important because otherwise it's a bit pointless the Regional Development Agencies delivering the RDPE.... The RES, that was really key to when we were looking at how we developed it [the RDPE plan] and what were the priorities that came from it. (EE:2C)

A focus on the economic would inevitably lead to choices which favoured the economic measures over the social and community measures available in the national plan for RDPE. However, a common focus on the economic did not lead to each region coming up with a similar formula for their RDPE plans. There are several explanations that could account for the divergence. Some of the plans included a strong narrative of their 'evidence base' suggesting that a technical approach had been adopted to show how the priorities were derived from an analysis of the needs and characteristics of the region. The absence of national control meant that the prevailing culture within each

Regional Development Agency differed. Objectives that did not accord with each Regional Development Agency's priorities were marginalised or excluded. The Agencies took for granted that the decisions were theirs to make within the overall EU and national framework, as regionalism devolved to them the responsibility to 'know what is best' for the region.

Interviewees perceived Regional Development Agencies differently to the Government Offices and state bodies.

> There is a fundamental point actually that the Forestry Commission and Natural England, for example, are structured very differently. They are national bodies with a regional presence (NW:14L)

As Regional Development Agencies grew into substantial organisations, an identity was constructed of a regional institution of, and for, the region.

> The majority of partners who we work with, the Government Office who are basically Whitehall in the regions, Forestry Commission, Natural England, are actually all national bodies and don't attempt to touch down very much even now at regional level. (NW:10C)

The interviewee considers that his Regional Development Agency was 'more of a regional body' than the other government partners. He implied that the Regional Development Agency had a true understanding of the region by being 'on the ground', so that it could respond to regional needs. Belief in their autonomy enabled them to make decisions which resulted in divergence.

Three discourses of response

This section sets out 'discourses of response', or the ways in which actors involved in rural development – other than those leading the devolved tasks in each region – construct regionalism. The actors, typically from local government, the not-for-profit sector and business organisations, engage with the activities of governing and take part in governance structures. Broadly, they adopt three positions – 'buying into regionalism', 'reluctant regionalism' and 'regional autonomy' (Table 2). The 'responses' are evident across the groups of actors who play a variety of roles in the facilitation of rural development.

Table 2: Three discourses of response

Discourse	Engagement	Governance	Metaphors
Buying into regionalism	Co-operating has positive consequences for our region	Regional bodies take a balanced view of the strategic priorities, and have the authority to make decisions for our region	Alignment The region as an entity A diverse rural region Regional flag-waving
Reluctant regionalism	Co-operating is a necessity if our territory, sector or topic of concern is not to lose out.	Influencing regional priority setting so that they reflect our concerns.	Government as hierarchy Unwillingness and frustration Rural issues are contested Stakeholders as supplicants
Local autonomy	Regionalism emasculates the local agenda. Opposition, ad hoc involvement, and disengagement	The region is a tier of the national state of unelected agencies, with no democratic mandate.	Rural issues are local issues The region is not an entity, has no identity

Buying into regionalism

'Buying into regionalism' involved the acceptance of the institutional structures and premises of regionalism. Those who bought into regionalism willingly took part in alliances which supported the growth and development of the regional level. There were different groups associated with this response. The first group were actors from agencies of national government. Regionalisation strengthened joint working between these national agencies and the regional bodies. The national agencies had established regional offices, often co-located with Government Offices. Two agencies, Natural England, and the Forestry Commission, together with the Regional Development Agencies were all involved in the delivery of different elements of the RDPE and hence shared a common purpose of making a regionalised system of the delivery of rural policy and programmes work. Actors in these agencies thought of the region as their territory and reinforced its construction as an appropriate political/administrative unit through their articulations of policy issues. The challenges of rural areas became part of the broader regional development narrative for those working for national government within the region.

The second group of actors who bought into regionalism came from the not for profit sector. These actors saw a benefit to operating at the regional scale. For example, the Rural Community Councils in the North West perceived that joint working with the regional government bodies would result in significant gains in terms of access to finance and ability to influence the regional agenda.

> We jointly established a company ... called North West Rural Community Councils, to wave that regional structure flag. That enabled us to get the seat on the North West Rural Strategy Board. We also use the flag in the North West Rural Affairs Forum and we've used it in our negotiations with the Development Agency. (NW:19T)

The close working relationship had positive consequences for all parties in this case. The regional institutions benefited from being able to engage the rural community sector through working with one corporate body whose boundaries were co-terminus with that of the region. For the community councils the regional structure allowed them access to key networks and

facilitated access to grant money which would have been harder to access as individual, county based organisations.

Reluctant regionalism

Both of the discourses of 'buying into regionalism' and 'reluctant regionalism' were shaped by perceptions of what could be achieved by working with regional institutions and structures. However, the distinguishing feature of reluctant regionalism was a lack of enthusiasm, unwillingness and frustration that had to be curtailed or managed if the benefits of collaboration were to be reaped. The example of the North West Rural Community Councils can be contrasted with the reluctant stance of Essex Rural Community Council in the East of England. Here, although action was taken to align to regional priorities in order to access funding, the attitude was reluctant and frustrated.

> To put it bluntly and simply, when I wanted my £1,000 from the regional forum I had to draw up priorities for funding that linked with the rural delivery plan. (EE:9L)

Similarly, Cambridgeshire Rural Community Council (also in the East of England) chose to refocus its work on county-based networks and local partners, developing relations with regional institutions only where funding programmes required it. The experience here was that working with the regional level was often difficult, with good relations only maintained for the sake of access to funding. The positions adopted by the not for profit sector were driven by their reliance on grant income. Reluctance and opposition was rarely articulated in official documents and meetings but was apparent in individual interviewees which probed the detail of workings relationships.

Rural local authorities may arguably have had more freedom to express reluctance and opposition as they were less directly dependant on grant income from the regional tier. However, in practice there were significant financial and political constraints. Keeping up an appearance of cooperation was a necessity if the local area was not to lose out on rural development funds. There were also party political reasons why the region had to be lived

with. The need to get on with the regional bodies for pragmatic reasons was commonly expressed by local government actors in both case study regions.

Those who expressed 'reluctant regionalism' from both local government and the not for profit sector emphasised two causes of this reluctance. The first was the lack of willingness, especially on the part of Regional Development Agencies, to allow local rural stakeholders to fully participate in decisions on rural policies and to play more active roles in running funding programmes. In the discourse the authority of the regional actors is questioned and responders consider that they have a 'right to participate'. The second cause related to different understandings of rural problems and issues. The interviewees tended to be interested in particular topics of concern. For example, a local authority respondent in the East of England referred to the need to address how to reconcile the differences in rural economic and social structures across the county he worked in. A rural community council in the same region was championing the cause of rural shops. In the North West region one of the rural community councils was focussing on fuel poverty as the issue of primary concern. These local preoccupations were not incorporated into regional rural policy with the result that actors questioned the regional institutions' depth of understanding of rural affairs.

The discourse of reluctant regionalism accepts that 'it is better to engage, than not to engage'. Actors sought to introduce their understandings of rural issues into debates at the regional scale in order to influence policy and funding allocation. For many, regionalisation created a necessity to participate in order to maintain the flow of funding. Finally another factor prompted engagement:

> If the region didn't exist you would to some extent have an even worse situation where the direction was very much set by the urban centres. (EE:20L)

There was a fear that without regionalism the rural could cease to be an object of national policy at all. In those circumstances, for reluctant regionalists, it was better to retain a regional infrastructure with a rural development component than no dedicated mechanism for rural support.

Local autonomy

Those who articulate the local autonomy discourses fundamentally opposed regionalism. They disputed the legitimacy of regional leadership and the existence of regional identities within England. In practice local autonomy was expressed by a quiet lack of engagement as well as vocal opposition. Most of the expressions of local autonomy in the case studies come from local authority interviewees. Cumbria (North West region) and Cambridgeshire (East of England region) local authority respondents provide examples of quiet disengagement whereas Essex County Council (East of England region) were at the forefront of campaigning against regionalism (Hanningfield, 2009).

The interviewees from Cambridgeshire County Council expressed significant discontent with the stance and actions of regional decision makers on the basis that they were not attuned to what was happening within localities. This resonated with the concerns of the reluctant regionalists but resulted in a different response. Where local autonomy was the prevailing discourse elected politicians and paid officials were only tangentially involved with regional institutions and networks. In the case of Cambridgeshire this amounted to engaging with regional funding programmes and one elected member sitting on the regional Rural Affairs Forum. This involved occasional attendance at forum meetings – a token response to be seen to be engaged at a basic level. The dominant response, expressed by the senior officials in the Authority, was to 'carry on with the day job' of fulfilling the statutory purposes of local government and not to engage with the regional players on anything other than an 'ad hoc', pragmatic basis.

In Cumbria, the County Council interviewee was more strident in his criticism of regional governance. However, in formal forums he maintained similar behaviour patterns as the Cambridgeshire actors, in order to ensure that the "funding tap" was not turned off. He considered that his conception of Cumbria's rural issues and appropriate policy responses were not shared by regional actors, and could see no way of changing regional working in a way which would accommodate his views on rural development in the county. The prevalent regional development model was argued to assume that rural

dwellers are reliant on towns and that the towns are at the centre. The view of the Cumbrian interviewee was that regional actors applied these models without reflecting on what it meant for localities. Regional leadership has no legitimacy in the 'local autonomy' discourse but even those who subscribed to this perception of regionalism were forced to work with 'the region' in various ways. A stance of quiet, partial engagement minimised political conflict for the sake of access to funding.

The interviewee from Essex County Council (East of England) openly refuted the autonomy and leadership of the regional tier.

> Who are these people in Cambridge to be telling us to put 143,000 homes in Essex? We'll build where we want, thank you very much. (EE:4L)

This stance, also broadly reflected in the public proclamations of other members of the Authority, is driven by a political belief that regional governance should be abolished because it is 'unaccountable to local people' (Hanningfield, 2009, p39). Essex leaders concluded that locally determined policies and local solutions should not be subservient to programmes determined by 'a tier of unelected agencies'. The Essex interviewee also cited the lack of regional identity in support of local autonomy. In this discourse, if the region is not a cultural entity, policy responses cannot legitimately be conceived for it.

In practice there was engagement between officers of Essex County Council and the regional structures. There were occasions when it is critical for the Authority to work with the Regional Development Agency in order to draw down funds. Nevertheless, the dominant discourse of regionalism is that it emasculates the local and is unnecessary. In contrast to the fears of the reluctant regionalists that without the region 'the rural' would struggle to achieve any political and policy attention, proponents of local autonomy viewed the regional level as largely an unnecessary irrelevance.

> I don't think it would really affect us that much if the region wasn't there. (EE:4L)

The discourses are ideal cases. In reality, individual actors and discursive events are more multifaceted and can exemplify more than one of the

discourses of the region and discourses of response. What the discourses illuminate however, is the complex patterns of cooperation and resistance which arose as a result of the national government programme of regionalisation.

Discussion and conclusion

The governance of territory can be addressed at different scales. Prior to the 1990s, rural development policy had been – in Rose and Miller's term (1992) – problematised principally at a national and local, or county scale. In the decade prior to New Labour, regional, cross sectoral groupings began to construct a regional tier of governance. By 1997 the activities of governing were embedding a regional scale, so that rural policy was problematised for the English regions as well as for England and local scales. Regional governance evolved and deepened throughout New Labour's term, with consequences for rural development policy at the English state and local scales.

Two distinct periods of regionalising rural policy can be discerned. In the first period, government policy was principally for England, with regions acting as a conduit for communications and carrying out policy. Until the Rural Strategy 2004, there continued to be bodies for rural England – the Countryside Agency and English Nature. For a brief time, rural policy for England embraced the multiplicity of socio-economic and environmental concerns, even drawing in agriculture, historically a separate strand. Tasks devolved to the Government Offices were technical managerial ones, to 'deliver' government policy, and set up 'rural sounding boards' so that government could demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of rural concerns. Regional Development Agencies were expected to support the rural economy, though in the Rural White Paper 2000 were merely one part of the rich mix of organisations with a role in the future of the countryside, sharing in the relatively generous amounts of funding available at the time for rural development.

Prior to 1997, the former state agencies of the Rural Development Commission, Countryside Commission and the Nature Conservancy, and latterly English Nature, had been constructed as innovators, experimenters and leaders of excellence through many political terms of government, bringing their expertise to bear both on the formulation of 'rural issues' and their solutions. Knowledge was formed for each specialist sector and success was achieved through complementing, rather than opposing, the dominant discourse of agriculture policy. Similar story lines continued into the early New Labour years. The Countryside Agency defined rural issues, policy and the means of achieving them. Programmes were delivered through regional and local networks including their own regional offices.

In the second period of regionalising rural development policy from 2004 onwards socio-economic rural policy was adopted as an instrument of regionalism, and structural change separated the strands of rural policy, promoting some and downgrading others. The Rural Strategy 2004 and the institutional changes that followed, demoted the story lines of inclusive rural development at the England tier (Ward, 2008, p39). The Countryside Agency was replaced by a weakened advisory body with a narrow 'watchdog' role, the Commission for Rural Communities. Socio-economic and territorial rural development policy were subsumed into regionalism.

This was a fundamental change from previous territorial rural programmes such as the Rural Development Commission and EU programmes. An East of England interviewee remembered the localised rural policy role.

> The Rural Development Area Strategy Committee in Suffolk was entirely peopled by people who understood rural stuff and understood their patches and knew what was going on, and knew what needed to be done. I mean there was an intimacy to that process which certainly doesn't exist now. (EE:5L)

Decision-making frameworks were constructed for rural territories, and rural had its own resources. Urban issues and resources were not in the frame. They were not subject to 'regional' policies when determining their priorities, and whilst their actions would have been constrained by Rural Development Commission policy, the recollection is of autonomy and self determination.

A second change of rescaling was to revise the patterns of governance. Prior to regionalisation, cooperative elite networks managed experiments and distributed funds according to mutually supportive plans.

> The old process, you would have to say it was thoroughly inclusive. The committee that was overseeing the fairly modest budget was heavy, not heavyweight but inclusive, with members from every district that was affected. A couple of members from the county, senior officers etc. and our budget was £1 million or something, so it was quite a big structure. (EE:5L)

Formal governance was seen as important to legitimise the allocation of resources to "rural stuff", as was the knowledge and credentials of the actors to act for their local area. Shifts to regional governance began to take place with European programmes and the administrative regionalisation of integrated Government Offices from the mid 1990s, though rural remained separate. The Rural Strategy 2004 marked the final shift, devolving policy making and resource allocation decisions to the regional institutions, legitimised by story lines of devolution. The region became the scale of knowledge production, performed by the officers of the state in the region. Tasks were devolved such that Regional Development Agencies became deliverers, and Government Offices had monitoring and coordinating roles.

The regionalisation of the Rural Development Programme for England meant that applications and bids for Leader funds were made to the Regional Development Agencies and their staff were responsible for negotiating with applicants and making the decisions. By the time elements of the Rural Development Programme for England were devolved, regionalisation had been underway for nearly a decade and the Agencies were relatively mature institutions with their own identity, experience of regeneration activity, and the autonomy to govern their resources. There was a step change to Regional Development Agencies carrying out direct delivery, independent from and not requiring collaboration with others.

The North West RDPE Plan appears to provide an example of non-state players having some impact on decisions concerning Leader, facilitated by a participative discourse. The interviews confirmed that the stance of the lead actor from the Government Office set a pattern of participative practices. This,

combined with the experience of local actors in former programmes, and a vision of how the Leader-approach could be applied in the 2007-2013 programme appears to explain the prominence of Leader in the RDPE plan. Cumbria Rural Community Council, and my own discussions at the time with Leader colleagues, suggest that one or two key individuals influenced the scope of Leader in the RDPE plan.

> N, my colleague here who manages the programme, did a fantastic job in persuading the Development Agency that Leader would be a great tool for delivering both Axis 1 and Axis 3. So we have two Leader programmes now in Cumbria which cover the whole of the rural parts of the county and are delivering the whole of Axis 1 and Axis 3. (NW:19)

Recent research confirms that the lead was taken at the County tier.

> In Cumbria a core group of stakeholders took the decision at an early stage to develop a proposal to deliver the whole of Axes 1 and 3 funding via a mainstreamed LEADER approach. The work to develop a strong case for mainstreamed LEADER (and capacity building to support this process) preceded formal NWDA invitations to develop LEADER groups with a focus on presenting a highly organised and united plan to the NWDA. (Convery et al, 2010)

Success of the local plan is likely to have been aided by the regional norms of encouraging 'sub-regional' participation and collaboration.

Production of the RDPE plan in the Eastern region was portrayed very differently by the non-government actors.

> The Rural Affairs Forum was used as a sounding board for RDPE. I don't recall any workshops. All the usual devices that you would use to roll people together and get them sticking post-its on walls, I don't remember any of that going on. EEDA were quite resistant to exposure and completely out of kilter with partnership working. (EE:5L)

The RDPE plan was an administrative, technical task to be undertaken on behalf of the region. Seeking views on the needs and priorities from the Rural Affairs Forum was seen as useful and fulfilled the requirements to show that consultation had taken place to legitimise the plan. However, decision making was the preserve of regional government agents, reflecting discourses of 'administrative regionalism' and 'regional autonomy'. Regional norms portrayed non-state players as 'deliverers' irrelevant to decision making.

The emphasis on local people participating in planning and objective setting inherent in Leader philosophy (Ray, 1996; Shucksmith, 2000), and the

diversity of Leader areas, could have been expected to lead to variations between Leader group plans in the same region. However, an analysis of Leader strategies in the three northern English regions (Thompson, 2009) revealed very limited intra-regional differentiation. Similarities within regions were explained by the need to work to a common regional process that ensured local strategies cohered with regional ones. Leader groups made bids to the Regional Development Agencies on the basis of a plan that addressed the priorities of the regional strategies. The result was intra-regional consistency. Policy was formulated on the basis of a generic, regional territory. Rural was part of each region's story, such that it emphasised the region as a self-contained, distinct unit. Planning at a regional scale restricted the choices available to the local level.

The interlinking of regionalisation and rural policy has had implications for capacity building and participation in rural development, long recognised by researchers as critical aspects of successful rural initiatives (McNicholas and Woodward, 1999; Ray, 1996). The political imperative of Regional Development Agencies to transform the economic fortunes of their region, did not motivate them to be interested in rural capacity building as noted by a North West interviewee.

> NWDA is concerned with the capacity of the organisation involved to deliver. Leader's about capacity development, it's not about expecting something to be operating from day one. Leader's about helping development capacity. (NW:17L)

The interviewee is pointing out a distinction between Regional Development Agency requirements for 'their delivery bodies' to meet spend and output targets, and the ethos of Leader to build local delivery capacity. Success in community capacity building did not feature in the Regional Development Agency targets, which emphasised the region as the engine of economic growth.

Regionalisation changed the patterns of policy making and governance, opening up the potential for contestation between scales. The discourses of regional and local autonomy represent the extremes of difference derived from opposing ideologies of nationally led regionalism, and locally-determined

decision-making. The concatenation of rural and economic policy, through devolving to Regional Development Agencies the socio-economic elements of the Rural Development Programme for England, conceived at the EU scale as an integrated rural development programme, undermined the breadth of rural development as well as the local capacity building element of Leader.

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