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► To cite this version:

Patsy Healey. City regions and place development. Regional Studies, 2009, 43 (06), pp.831-843.
10.1080/00343400701861336 . hal-00516538

HAL Id: hal-00516538

<https://hal.science/hal-00516538>

Submitted on 10 Sep 2010

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Journal:	<i>Regional Studies</i>
Manuscript ID:	CRES-2007-0018.R1
Manuscript Type:	Main Section
JEL codes:	O2 - Development Planning and Policy < O - Economic Development, Technological Change, and Growth, R52 - Land Use and Other Regulations < R5 - Regional Government Analysis < R - Urban, Rural, and Regional Economics
Keywords:	Metropolitan region, economic competitiveness, government devolution, sustainable development, social innovation, institutional design

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City regions and place development¹

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First received: January 2007
Accepted: July 2007

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of a ‘city region’ in the context of proposals for re-configuring sub-national government arrangements. It considers the various arguments behind calls for a ‘city region’ focus, and reviews recent experiences in the Netherlands and England. This highlights that the concept of a ‘city region’ can be mobilised both as an organising device and to call attention to place dynamics. There are dangers in a narrow focus on administrative and economic considerations when promoting the creation of ‘city region’ institutional arenas. Instead, greater attention is needed to promoting more integrated, locally-specific, place development agendas.

Key Words:

Metropolitan region, economic competitiveness, government devolution, sustainable development, social innovation, institutional design, integrated area development

Ville-région et développement de places

Patsy Healey

L'auteur analyse le concept de ville-région dans le contexte de propositions de reconfiguration d'arrangements gouvernementaux subnationaux. Il prend en considération les divers arguments, appelle à se concentrer sur les villes régions et passe en revue des expériences récentes menées aux Pays-Bas et en Angleterre. Il insiste sur le fait que le concept de ville-région peut être mobilisé comme dispositif d'organisation et pour rappeler l'attention sur la dynamique de places. Il est dangereux de se concentrer étroitement sur des considérations administratives et économiques lorsque l'on fait la promotion de la création d'ensembles institutionnels de villes-régions. Au contraire, il faut attacher une plus grande attention à la promotion de programmes de développement de places mieux intégrés et spécifiques sur le plan local.

¹ My thanks to Sara Gonzalez for discussion and keeping me up-to-date with the fast-moving English debates, and to the editors and referees of this special issue for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

Mots-clés : région métropolitaine, compétitivité économique, dévolution au gouvernement, développement durable, innovation sociale, concept institutionnel, développement de zones intégrées.

JEL : O2, R52

Stadtregionen und Raumentwicklung

Patsy Healey

Abstract

In diesem Beitrag wird das Konzept der 'Stadtregion' im Kontext von Vorschlägen zur Neugestaltung von subnationalen Regierungsformen untersucht. Ich untersuche die verschiedenen Argumente hinter der Forderung nach einem Fokus auf der 'Stadtregion' und überprüfe die jüngsten Erfahrungen aus den Niederlanden und England. Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen, dass sich das Konzept der 'Stadtregion' sowohl als organisatorisches Instrument als auch zur Hervorhebung von örtlichen Dynamiken nutzen lässt. Bei der Förderung der Schaffung von institutionellen 'Stadtregion'-Arenen besteht die Gefahr eines zu engen Fokus auf verwaltungstechnischen und wirtschaftlichen Gesichtspunkten. Stattdessen sollte der Förderung von integrierteren und lokalspezifischen Raumentwicklungsplänen stärkere Beachtung geschenkt werden.

Key Words:

Metropolitane Region
Wirtschaftliche Konkurrenzfähigkeit
Politische Dezentralisierung
Nachhaltige Entwicklung
Gesellschaftliche Innovation
Institutionelle Gestaltung
Integrierte Raumentwicklung

JEL: O2, R52

Ciudad-regiones y desarrollo de áreas

Patsy Healey

Abstract

En este artículo analizo el concepto de 'ciudad-región' en el contexto de propuestas para reconfigurar los acuerdos gubernamentales subnacionales. Considero los diferentes argumentos con respecto al enfoque de una 'ciudad-región' y analizo las recientes experiencias en los Países Bajos e Inglaterra. Destaco que el concepto de una 'ciudad-región' puede aprovecharse como dispositivo organizativo y como

elemento para destacar las dinámicas de áreas. Al fomentar la creación de escenarios institucionales de una ‘ciudad-región’ se corre el peligro de limitarse a las consideraciones administrativas y económicas. Más bien se debería prestar más atención para fomentar programas del desarrollo de áreas más integrados y localmente específicos.

Key Words:

Región metropolitana
Competitividad económica
Transferencia de competencias del Gobierno
Desarrollo sostenible
Innovación social
Diseño institucional
Desarrollo integrado de áreas

JEL: O2, R52

Imagining city regions

The concept of 'city region' is deeply embedded in European imagination and in spatial planning concepts (Le Gales, 2002). It is often assumed that a 'city region' corresponds with a 'functional reality' of integrated economic, political and social relations. This 'reality' could be grounded in a pre-industrial idea of the connection between market towns and administrative centres and their surrounding rural hinterlands. Or it could refer to integrated housing and labour markets revolving around an 'urban 'core' of an urbanised region (OECD, 2006b, Clark, 2005). In recent years, the 'city region' concept has been linked to the idea that large cities are dynamic centres of economic innovation, producing 'assets' with which cities compete in global space (Scott, 2001), Harding et al. 2004). Some have emphasised the 'city region' as an areal unit within which critical socio-environmental relations can be effectively contained, and, as such, a valuable focus for pursuing strategies for more environmentally-sustainable forms of urban development (Ravetz, 2000). The planning tradition in particular has traditionally looked to the 'city region' as a focus for 'comprehensive' place development strategies. These days, the idea that public policy could 'comprehensively plan' complex urban areas has long been demolished. But yet both in aspirations and in practices, those involved in 'planning systems' find themselves at the sharp end of encounters between social, environmental and economic agendas as these are played out in particular places. They are thus unavoidably engaged with 'place development' activities.

Twentieth century regional planners and development analysts in Europe have repeatedly turned to the idea that 'functional' realities should be aligned with administrative jurisdictions, to create planning areas – city regions, metropolitan regions, functional urban areas, etc, which contain within them the critical relations upon which the future development trajectories of settlements depend. Before twentieth century urbanisation, the city commune or municipality seemed to provide such correspondence. By the mid-twentieth century, as urban infrastructures and communications networks spread across national landscapes, urban relations exploded beyond municipal boundaries, generating all kinds of proposals to create larger

administrative arenas to correspond with the perceived ‘functional’ city region. But attempts to tie critical economic, social, political and environmental relationships to a concept of a relationally-integrated ‘urban place’ have become increasingly difficult, as different relational webs connect people, firms and non-human processes to all sorts of other places, often in more closely ‘integrated’ ways than to spatially-contiguous neighbours. What then can a ‘city region’ be and what is its value as a planning and governance concept? Does it still have a value in promoting some kind of ‘integrated’ policy attention to the place qualities and place development of complex urban areas?

If city regions could be understood as ‘objectively existing’ phenomena, as coherent, stable, discrete, socio-spatial conjunctions and aggregations, bounding within them the major relations of all aspects of social, economic, political and economic life, then there is a case for co-aligning political jurisdictions with such functional entities. Within Europe, under the auspices of both the current mobilisation of attention to European spatial development (Committee, 1999), (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002), (Faludi, 2003), and national concerns for re-configuring sub-national government, there has been a recent upsurge of interest in the statistical definition of ‘functional urban regions’². But analyses of urban and regional development processes emphasise that the diverse relations which transect and intersect across and through urban areas have many different kinds of space-time dimensions which are rarely stable. The search for a ‘city region’ area which encompasses some stable ‘coherence’ and ‘integration’ relations may therefore be misguided.

In its place have come two recognitions. The first derives from an epistemology which recognises that ideas of the city, city region, of place, are not objectively ‘there’, but are imagined concepts, constructed in particular times and places for specific reasons (Amin, 2002), (Healey, 2002), (McGuirk, 2006?). This raises questions about the purposes of such constructions and the institutional work they do. The second comes from an awareness of the complexity and diversity of the socio-spatial relations through which phenomena are distributed in space and time. Any physical area has, moving through, around and over it, all kinds of relations, with

² See especially the work commissioned by ESPON, the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network, www.espon.eu.

diverse space-time dynamics, reach and patternings. Sometimes these interrelate and coalesce, to produce qualities, synergies (and dysfunctions) which help to create a sense of place-ness. Such qualities may become associated with a history and identity in a cultural geography. Or they may be recognised in an economic geography of 'places with assets'. Or they are linked to a political-administrative search for better co-ordination of public investments and programmes, or for better ways to connect the state with citizens and other stakeholders in relations which touch a 'place'. But a 'place-focus' which suits one set of relations may well bump up against the spatial patterning of another. For example, (Jones and MacLeod, 2005), referring to initiatives in south west England, highlight the tension between 'localised production spaces' and 'spaces of citizenship' around which local political mobilisation may occur. In other words, an integration of diverse relations in urban areas cannot be assumed to exist. Contemporary advocates of 'city region' ideas acknowledge this in comments about the 'fuzzy' boundaries around the areas they imagine (Harding et al., 2004), (NLGN, 2005).

Yet some kind of 'place integration' can be cultivated by deliberate action. Creating a 'city region' as a political-administrative entity capable of promoting 'city region' place qualities might, in the long term, have this effect (for examples, see (Albrechts et al., 2003), (Herschel and Newman, 2005). But there is no necessary correspondence between the creation of formal jurisdictions and the production of governance capacity for place-focused development programmes. The experience of places where some kind of correspondence seems to exist, such as the Portland area in Oregon, US (Abbott, 2001), or the Hanover area in Germany (Albrechts et al., 2003) suggests that such a correspondence requires substantial and enduring mobilisation of governance attention around a city region place development project. Mobilisation of this kind involves generating attention and energy, to draw into some kind of encounter and conjunction the particular relations of significance to such a place development project. In other words, the justification for the creation of 'city regions' lies not so much in connecting political jurisdictions to objectively-existing, integrated 'functional areas'. Instead, it lies in the impact which the creation of such an institutional arena and spatial conception may, over time and in some areas, come to have on the relations which weave through, around and across a physical area.

These two insights have been developed in what has come to be known as ‘relational geography’ (Amin and Thrift, 2002), (Amin, 2002), (Graham and Healey, 1999, Massey, 2005, Healey, 2004, Healey, 2006, Jones and MacLeod, 2005, Marston and Jones 111, 2005). This emphasises that cities were never unambiguous, integrated socio-physical objects, even in pre-industrial times. Urban life is lived through all kinds of different relational webs, which interweave across the terrain of the urban. Some webs intersect with others to produce intense synergies and complex tensions, partly creative, partly destructive. Others barely touch each other, or clear a way through blockages in ways which displace and block the opportunities for others. The urban is always in production and always full of potentialities and tensions. All kinds of terms have been used to express different dimensions of the experience of urban life, each reflecting different imaginations and different purposes. The concept of a ‘city region’ is no exception. Such place concepts, in a relational geography, are ‘summoned up’ into imagination, fed by some resonance with an experienced reality (Amin, 2004). When used in governance contexts such as spatial planning, they are fed back into particular relational webs, to have material effects on such realities (Healey, 2006). But inevitably, such concepts are selective in their focus of attention. Some relations and integrations are emphasised, while others slip out of the limelight.

The invocation of ‘city regions’ in a public policy context can thus be understood both as an organising device, to focus attention and governance activity, and as a call for attention to place dynamics, to focus policy agendas and programmes. This raises three issues. Firstly, who is doing the ‘summoning up’ of the idea of a city region, for what purposes, and in what institutional arenas, with what legitimacy and accountability? Secondly, what relations and identities are carried within a particular conception of a ‘city region’, associated with what mobilisation force and with what potential consequences? Thirdly, what kind of contribution could such a concept make to the form and content of place development trajectories?

In this paper, I develop the approach outlined above through a review of the various arguments for promoting a city region as an institutional arena and a policy focus. I then briefly comment on recent experiences in constructing ‘metropolitan’ institutional arenas in the Netherlands and the current enthusiasm for ‘city regions’ in England. Both illustrate the difficulties of promoting new sub-national institutional

arenas in the crowded governance landscapes of North-West Europe. Finally, I return to the questions raised above and consider the value of promoting ‘institutional fixes’ around ‘city’ and ‘metropolitan’ regions in relation to the promotion of place development agendas which have the capacity to link together (that is, to ‘integrate’) concerns for social justice, environmental well-being and economic vitality.

City regions and the politics of place development

There has been a vigorous promotion of ideas about city regions, urban regions, metropolitan areas, sub-regions, polycentric regions and ‘functional urban areas’ in western Europe in recent years. This has been linked to a broader and diffuse project of re-configuring formal government organisation and practices (see (Keating, 1997), (Keating, 2006), (Morgan, 2006), (Brenner, 1999, Brenner, 2004), (Gualini, 2006). Economic and administrative considerations have dominated in the debates about such initiatives. Some analysts interpret the search for sub-national re-configuration as a move, in the context of ‘globalising’ economic dynamics, beyond the nation state as the key site for negotiating relations between the spheres of the state and of economic activity. For regulation theorists, changes in the ‘mode of accumulation’ of the global economy generate pressures for a shift from a welfare-oriented, managerial and delivery-focused state, to an ‘entrepreneurial state’, focused on creating conditions for innovation and continual adaptation to changing economic contexts (Jessop, 2002, Jessop, 2000, MacLeod, 1999). In terms of the organisation of state agencies, this means devolving state power to regional and local levels, shifting more activity to economic actors, and developing horizontal relations between actors, to replace the vertical policy communities which had formed around the service delivery activities of the welfare state. In this argument, policy attention to regional development moves from a focus on re-distribution of wealth from ‘leading’ regions to ‘lagging’ regions, to a focus on the autonomous (and diverse) development dynamics of all areas in an economic landscape of regional economies in competition with each other (OECD, 2006b), (Harding et al., 2004), (Combes et al., 2006). The objective is not so much to create employment opportunities for those adversely affected by industrial restructuring. Instead, it is to create wealth through cultivating innovative place-development assets. Claims are often made that ‘cities’ are sites of economic

innovation in the context of a ‘knowledge society’, in which agglomeration economies and cultural synergies are assets, although there are active critical debates about such claims, not least in the pages of *Regional Studies*. Morgan (2006) describes the claims as representing a shift from creating an ‘employment dividend’ to an ‘economic dividend’. This ‘economic competitiveness’ argument serves to justify a more selective application of national government growth-promoting development investment to specific projects and areas, rather than generalised budget allocations to subnational programmes. In this context, a ‘city region’ could become the critical institutional arena both for identifying and selecting projects in a new sub-national configuration of government, and for encouraging the promotion of some kind of endogenous economic development. Rather than a ‘levelling up’ of areas, this development conception emphasises cities in competition with each other, both for success in creating an ‘economic dividend’ and for public funds to help them in this venture. As will be seen, such arguments have been influential in both the Netherlands and the UK.

These economic arguments are often buttressed by concerns about the consequences of a shift from the delivery practices of the different services within a ‘welfare’ nation state, to the more diffuse array of provision of welfare and infrastructure facilities and services resulting from all kinds of forms of privatisation, contracting out and partnership in the provision of ‘public goods’. Regulation theorists and many others often refer to this as a shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ (Jessop, 1997), (Gualini 2006). A ‘city region’ arena may be promoted to draw these different networks of provision together, to enable better co-ordination and delivery of services and infrastructures in particular places. This administrative efficiency argument may in turn be linked to the search for a better relation between citizens and state, making it easier for policy-makers to interact with and pay attention to citizens and their concerns. In this argument, a ‘city region’, below both the nation state and larger regional units, is rhetorically promoted as a way to give more legitimacy to public policy programmes, and thus to serve the project of ‘democratic renewal’ in Western European countries.

This is already a big agenda for a policy idea. But the economic and political arguments which sustain it are not uncontested or stable. In the twentieth century,

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3 initiatives to create new city region/metro region arenas have not always endured or
4 got beyond enabling legislation (Salet et al., 2003, Albrechts et al., 2001, Neuman and
5 Gavinha, 2005). To have significant effects and to endure through changes in
6 intellectual fashions and political attention, the idea of the place of a 'city region' has
7 to become embedded in key relations and imaginations within the place itself. It has to
8 act as a critical identity-shaping force, mobilising attention locally when neglected
9 externally³. A 'city region' concept which has such power will then have significant
10 effects in generating and maintaining synergies and resistances which will produce
11 distinctive place qualities. This implies that the promotion of a 'city region' as a
12 generalised policy idea needs to be coupled with some kind of more specific and
13 localised 'place development' project and some idea of how this might be pursued.
14 Such a project, of course, underlies the 'economic competitiveness' discourse, which
15 accepts a conception of the regional differentiation of development potentials across
16 national and European space. Cities and regions are now often presented in policy
17 rhetoric as critical sites for the creation of development energy, of endogenous
18 development, through the promotion of specific assets and the removal of barriers to
19 development opportunity (Clark, 2005, Harding et al., 2004). Yet this rhetoric tends to
20 be articulated as a generalised recipe, with little specific emphasis on the particular
21 relations and dynamics which underpin the occurrence of the 'assets' and generate the
22 'development opportunities' of particular localities. This criticism is forcefully made
23 in a recent OECD study of 'Newcastle in the North East' (OECD, 2006a), and could
24 easily have been made of other English regional and sub-regional development
25 strategies (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2006). The result is a 'thin' place
26 development concept and a weak formation of enduring institutional energy to
27 underpin a strategy. Programmes developed from and through such strategies, 'top-
28 down regionalisation' as Jones and MacLeod (2005) call them, are likely to have
29 some effects merely because they lever on significant national and European public
30 funding streams. They add little value in themselves.

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A further major weakness of these kinds of strategies is their pre-occupation with the
economic sphere. In re-configuring government arrangements from vertical, sectoral

³ This point is made clearly in the interim report of the Lyons Inquiry into the future of local government in England, (Lyons, M. 2006 *National prosperity, local choice and civic engagement: a new partnership between central and local government for the 21st century* London The Stationary Office

departments and policy communities, which separated economic, social and environmental considerations into discrete, hierarchically-ordered institutional nexuses, this economic emphasis suggests a separation into government levels. City region arenas can address the relations between the state and economic actors, formerly focused at the national level (OECD, 2006b, Harding et al., 2004), while municipalities and sub-municipal arenas can address the relations between citizens and the state. But such a separation is in striking contrast to other 'place development' ideas which have been emerging in the past two decades. Two such ideas develop a broader perspective on place qualities. Both emphasise the importance of place development agendas in which economic dimensions are integrated with environmental and social dimensions in all levels and arenas of government.

One of these is the agenda of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development'. This takes a general perspective on how societies should develop, but is deeply concerned with how many relations play out in particular places to impact not only on relations within a locale but on wider environmental, social and economic dynamics. The concept of 'sustainable development' itself emphasises the need to maintain economic, social and environmental considerations in some kind of constructive encounter. The city region, in this perspective, is 'summoned up' through such a lens as a critical site for identifying and managing how different relations interact, in order to reduce environmental stresses both locally and globally. This agenda emphasises qualities of the 'liveability' of the urban environment, and its sustainability over the longer term in the face of environmental impacts and threats (see (Satterthwaite, 1999), (Williams et al., 2000), (Cowans, 2006), (Ravetz, 2000), (Haughton and Hunter, 1994), (Haughton and Counsell, 2004).

The 'sustainable development' movement also places considerable emphasis on involving multiple stakeholders, including residents, in strategy development, since behavioural change is a key dimension for reducing environmental stress. This discourse thus emphasises the development of more interactive relations between citizens and the state, and between citizens, businesses and the state. Its agenda has considerable popular momentum in Western Europe and is likely to disrupt any economic development programme which fails to give it adequate attention.

The discourses of 'economic competitiveness' and 'sustainable development' dominated urban and regional development agendas in many European countries in the 1990s, though often pursued in separate institutional nexuses⁴. However, the 'competitiveness' discourse is also challenged by a third discourse which centres around issues of social justice and cultural distinctiveness, hovered in the interstices of these dominant conceptions. This was partly an inheritance of the earlier welfare attention to maintaining universal standards of basic needs. It was enriched by increasing understanding of the diversity of social worlds and life trajectories, and of the importance of the imaginative and cultural dimensions of people's place attachments. As a place development concept, this discourse views place development nationally, from a concern with uneven development, and locally, from the perspective of the promotion of social well-being in places and cultivating endogenous development capacity through social as well as economic initiatives. It addresses economic and environmental relations through concepts of social innovation and well-being in cities of diversity and multiplicity (Amin et al., 2000), (Amin et al., 2002), (Moulaert et al., 2000), (Moulaert et al., 2005), (Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005).

Different policy discourses thus embody and encourage different conceptions of the place qualities of urban areas. These various place development discourses jostle with each other as claims on the content of 'city region' concepts. They are often promoted by quite different policy communities, with only limited linkages between them. Could the insertion of a 'city region' institutional arena reconfigure governance relations and provide a site of encounter between such different discourses, and contribute to developing a more coherent, broader and more 'integrated' place development discourse? Jonas et al. (Jonas et al., 2005) suggest that the 'core cities' campaign in England has this potential (see on). Could it help to create institutional spaces for an assertive 'politics of place' which could attract attention among many of the relational nexuses which intersect and co-exist in localities, and develop enduring, localised persuasive force to shape development trajectories and place imaginations

⁴ See the influence of the ESDP (CSD 1999) and through this, on planning policy communities, in several nation states, including the UK, in the later 1990s/early 2000s. In this way, those advocating the 'economic competitiveness' discourse referred to 'planning' as a drag on innovative energy, wrapping up the 'sustainable development' and other discourses into a simple concept of the way 'land use regulation' impedes development energy.

over time? Or is the mobilisation of the ‘city region’ idea just an attempt by national elites to ‘download’ their difficulties in distributing development investment resources among multiple claimants?

I now briefly explore the potential of the ‘city region’ concept from the perspective of the Netherlands and England, both countries with very open societies and economies, and with dense agglomerations of people creating many stresses and strains on the natural environment, itself subject to major future hazards as climate change gathers momentum. In both countries, the issue of the reconfiguration of sub-national government has been active in debate and public policy. In the Netherlands, there have been recent attempts to create formal metropolitan regions. I focus especially on the Amsterdam area, recently praised by Fainstein (Fainstein, 2000) as an exemplar of a ‘just city’. In England, city regions were promoted in conjunction with the vigorous pursuit of a regional agenda and in parallel with a movement to reclaim more power and authority for local government, a ‘new localism’. Both illustrate the difficulties of inserting new institutional arenas and new policy agendas in already-crowded governance contexts.

Building metropolitan region institutional arenas in the Netherlands

A strongly-developed sense of geography has long underpinned Dutch public policy. The country has been imagined as having a strongly urbanised core, characterised in the well-established concept of the Randstad, a ring of towns and cities surrounding a ‘green heart’. Here are the main centres of economic activity and trading ‘mainports’ (Rotterdam and Amsterdam Schiphol) connecting with the rest of the world. Around this, to the north, east and south is a landscape of towns and rural hinterlands. The development of this landscape has been managed since the mid-twentieth century by a co-sociation of formal levels of government (national, province and municipality), along with other major societal actors, which has produced substantial co-alignment in the policies and programmes of different sectors and levels of government⁵. There have been different emphases over time between the relative importance of dispersing development outside the Randstad core, concentrating development in the major

⁵ My account here draws on a range of materials used in Healey (2007).

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3 cities, and resisting development ‘sprawl’ in favour of ‘compact cities’. Nevertheless,
4 considerations of economic priority, meeting social needs and aspirations to a high
5 standard of ‘liveability’ and protecting and enhancing environmental resources have
6 been drawn together in these co-alignment processes. The national spatial planning
7 ministry played a key role in providing a policy framework determining key
8 investments and strategic principles for urban development. Rural development was
9 governed by national approaches to water management and agricultural development.
10 In both fields, national strategies and decisions were the product of intensive
11 negotiation between levels and sectors of government, resulting in a spread of
12 development investment resources across the country.
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23 By the 1990s, however, this approach to the country’s spatial development was
24 coming under strain. Although the Netherlands had pioneered spatial strategies which
25 gave a high priority to reducing the pressure on environmental resources, both locally
26 and globally, the influence of the Europe-wide ‘economic competitiveness’ discourse
27 gathered momentum. This encouraged attention to equipping the country with
28 infrastructure investment to maintain its strength internationally as a logistics hub. It
29 also allowed the major cities, which had been promoting their needs for a greater
30 share of development resources due to the concentration of social problems within
31 them, to argue that enhancing the quality of the country’s major urban centres was
32 desirable in the competition to attract global attention. By the 1990s, national spatial
33 strategy had defined key national development projects around the ‘mainports’ of
34 Rotterdam harbour and Amsterdam airport, and was encouraging the formation of
35 formally-constituted metropolitan areas centred on the ‘big cities’ and their
36 surrounding municipalities. This was accompanied by a more selective approach
37 nationally to development investment, focused on nationally-important projects,
38 accompanied by devolution of development budgets to the provincial level. Overall,
39 the aim was to reduce and focus development expenditures. This changed the politics
40 of negotiation over state development expenditures, from a multi-level governance
41 activity focused on shaping national strategy and programmes, to a struggle among
42 municipalities and provinces to get favoured projects recognised as of national
43 importance, and among municipalities to shape provincial development investment
44 strategies. This ‘opening up’ of the previous multi-level and multi-sectoral co-
45 alignment practices was made more complex by the weakening of spatial planning at
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the national level in favour of ministries dealing with economic development and infrastructure matters (Hajer and Zonneveld, 2000).

In this context, the creation of formal metropolitan authorities around the major cities held the promise of creating a strong institutional site from which to bargain with the national ministries and to manage the tensions between adjacent municipalities over priorities for development location and investment (Salet 2006). For many years, for example, the city of Amsterdam had worked hard to create some kind of sub-regional arena, below the level of the province, but also mobilising inter-provincial links where the evolving ‘functional linkages’ (housing markets, labour markets, etc) were spreading beyond municipal and provincial boundaries. For a while, the city council, a very influential voice at national level, promoted the idea of a metropolitan authority (Alexander, 2002). The proposal for such an authority in the Amsterdam area had difficulty in maintaining support among key municipalities and was eventually defeated by Amsterdam citizens after a referendum in 1995 (Salet and Gualini 2003, Healey 2007). However, the political need to find a way of building strong horizontal linkages among municipalities and between key state sectors involved in place development activity has remained, as the former vertically-structured, sectoral bastions around spatial planning and rural development have weakened. In the Amsterdam area, the politics of prioritising development investment has proceeded through the evolution of informal arenas for discussion and negotiation. In these, developing understanding of urban and regional dynamics and future potentialities has gone hand in hand with the production of spatial development concepts through which to articulate future possibilities and to locate and prioritise particular development projects. In other words, the creation of an idea of an emergent ‘metropolitan region’ has co-evolved with the creation of an informal institutional site for intermunicipal collaboration and conflict-resolution (Salet and Gualini 2003). In organisational terms, this process provided a flexible, networked structure through which to adjust to what had become, by the 2000s, a period of considerable destabilisation in the national polity and in national spatial development strategy.

In this example, the policy interest in metropolitan regions emerges as a response to shifts in the national budget priorities and a search to devolve the prioritisation of all but major projects from a co-alignment at the national level to negotiations at

province or sub-provincial levels. Despite the strong emphasis at national level on economic considerations, social and environmental considerations remain an important focus of attention, maintained by political parties, lobby groups and citizen concerns. The place of Amsterdam has a powerful pull on popular imagination and citizens will mobilise to defend it. This creates a grounding for 'integrated' perspectives on place development. However, as new governance practices evolved at sub-province level in the Amsterdam area, concepts of place development were continually narrowed down to the promotion of particular projects – bridges and highway connections, high speed train lines and stations, area development and redevelopment projects, and locations for major economic and housing developments. This continues the tradition in Amsterdam of place development understood as a practice of 'building the city' in physical terms. Capturing funding for a prioritised agenda of projects was at the forefront of attention, integrated area development in the background. Although some of these projects continue the Amsterdam tradition of weaving social, environmental and economic issues together in place development activities, there has been a new emphasis on creating partnerships focused on maximising the potential of economic 'hot spots' (Gualini and Majoor 2007). One consequence has been an increasing tendency to separate out these kinds of partnerships, dominated by corporate economic interests and major national stakeholders from those to which residents and citizen groups commonly relate, which tend to be the sub-municipal Districts and neighbourhood organisations (Healey 2007).

The informal metropolitan arena thus emerges as a locally-developed response to changing national funding arrangements and priorities, in which prioritising projects is a critical activity. The development of an integrated place development strategy hangs on this politics, to provide concepts and justifications both within the various institutional sites where key place development investments are being negotiated and in subsequent lobbying for national support. The creation of a metropolitan arena is fuelled by an understanding of the complex relations of a 'network society', but an integrated place development project is not itself a mobilising force in constructing such arenas. There are even concerns that the emphasis on public sector co-ordination and bidding for public funds might undermine Amsterdam's long-established focus on creating and sustaining liveable, lively and diverse urban neighbourhoods.

City regions and devolution in England

In the mid-2000s, ‘city region’ suddenly became a popular idea within the national ministry charged with local government, housing and planning responsibilities in England. It was not a new concept, as it had been argued for (and rejected) as a basis for re-organising local government back in the 1960s. Then it carried with it an idea of a city connected to its rural hinterland. Such a concept made sense in some parts of England, such as East Anglia, until recently a rural area with market towns where ‘city regions’ have been used as an organising concept for spatial development policy for many years (Healey 2007). Elsewhere, Britain’s legacy from nineteenth century industrialisation is a set of overlapping urban nexuses, for which the term ‘conurbation’ was coined. When local government was re-organised in the 1970s, these conurbations were recognised as ‘metropolitan areas’ with formally-created authorities, paralleling an arrangement already made for ‘Greater London’. But even then, the boundaries of these authorities were, for political reasons⁶, too tightly drawn to encompass what were identified as ‘functional urban areas’. By now, the complex overlapping and spatial extension of different housing markets, journey-to-work areas, and leisure opportunities makes the possibility of linking ‘functionally discrete’ metropolitan areas with administrative jurisdictions even more difficult, despite repeated re-arrangement of municipal functions and boundaries.

But the new enthusiasm for ‘city regions’ is a response not so much to a search for co-aligning ‘functional areas’ with administrative jurisdictions’, although this hope still lurks in administrative imaginations. Instead, it has arisen from a coming together of two streams of policy development, a campaign for a stronger focus on ‘Core Cities’ outside the London area and a campaign for stronger devolution to municipalities, under the banner of a ‘new localism’⁷. Both are grounded in a critique of uneven

⁶ In the 1970s, the large urban authorities tended to be in Labour control and areas around in Tory control. Under a national Tory administration, boundaries were drawn so as to minimise leakage of labour voters into Tory areas.

⁷ In parallel, in the context of developing the regional level of the planning system, there has also been encouragement to develop a ‘sub-regional’ focus when drawing up regional planning guidance and strategies (see Bianconi, M., Gallent, N. and Greatbach, I. (2006) The changing geography of subregional planning in England. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, **24**, 317-330.

development and the hyper-centralism of the British state. Although the discussion of uneven development is more nuanced these days, it could be said that the only long-standing spatial concept which lies below the surface in much English public policy and politics and which is embedded in popular consciousness, is that of a north-south divide. The south (and especially London and the South East, (John et al., 2005)), in this conception, is prosperous, socially-complex, economically-dynamic and with only a limited inheritance from the great days of Britain's industrial past. The north is economically weaker, generally bleaker (in southern eyes), industrialised and more working class. As many outside the 'south' complain, in Britain's centralised polity it is the conceptions, values and priorities of London and the South East which dominate public policy. The political struggle, within the UK as a whole and in England, has been to lever investment and development opportunities away from the south and to get more recognition for the growth potentials and diversity of development conditions in different parts of the country. This struggle underpins the long-standing attempts to reduce centralism and promote regional and local devolution. It has also been critical to the formation of a campaign by the major cities outside London and the South East, the so-called 'core cities' group, to maintain national policy attention to the needs and priorities of large urban areas, in the face of a concentration of development expenditure in the South East in the past twenty years (Jonas et al., 2005, Deas, 2006). These political concerns have made much use of the argument for the role of sub-national units – regions and cities, as key sites of economic innovation and hence significant in the overall promotion of the 'competitiveness' of the UK economy (Harding et al., 2004). The 'economic dividend' is continuously emphasised (Morgan 2006).

The details of the emergence of the 'city region' policy idea are well-described elsewhere (see, for example, NLGN 2005). The momentum for regional devolution reached its peak in the late 1990s with a new 'New Labour' national government, committed to more autonomy for Scotland and Wales. The regional level in England, which had been administratively strengthened throughout the 1990s, was then reinforced with new Regional Development Agencies, and, in the mid-2000s, with the requirement in the revised planning system for the production of Regional Spatial Strategies. With no formal equivalent to the Dutch provinces, the national government minister in charge of regional and local government then hoped to create elected

regional assemblies. The regions, however, have been formed out of administrative convenience for national government. They are large and often have within them more than one conurbation and some areas which are very rural. They thus have little functional coherence or connection to popular identities. What was actually offered in terms of the devolution of powers from national to regional government was limited and voters in the first area asked to vote on devolution were strongly negative. The regional project was left in limbo. But by this time, municipalities and other stakeholders had been mobilising, in the prospect that regional institutional arenas would become more important in the allocation of development investment funding, to promote projects and create alliances to push their interests. This led to arguments for more attention to sub-regions (Morphet, 2005, Counsell and Haughton, 2006, Morphet, 2006). These could be metropolitan areas⁸, or more rural areas with several small towns. In some cases, the pressure to create sub-regions was precisely to counteract the potential that the major cities, the big players in the core cities movement, would capture all the funding available to the region.

Meanwhile, at national level, the Ministry responsible for housing, local government and planning⁹, was under pressure to cope with the severe crisis resulting from a reduction in house building, particularly for affordable housing. This crisis was at its most severe in London and the South East, where economic growth had attracted substantial immigration from elsewhere in the UK and the rest of the world. The Ministry's commitment to the 'sustainable development' agenda meant that such growth needed to be accommodated where possible on more difficult to develop brownfield sites, while popular resistance to more development without infrastructure meant that attention had to be given to major investment in 'growth areas'. The Ministry was thus caught between the investment needs of growth promotion in the south and the pressure from the 'core cities' campaign in the north. This pressure resulted in two initiatives. One was the 'Sustainable Communities Action Plan' (ODPM, 2003) which proposed to target national urban development investment in both the longstanding 'urban regeneration' areas (mostly in urban cores across the country) and four newly-defined growth areas, all in the south east. The other was the

⁸ Because 'metropolitan counties' were created in the 1970s and then abolished, this term has not been used in recent debates.
⁹ This Ministry has been subject to frequent changes in name and in responsibilities in recent years. It is currently (since June 2006), the Department for Communities and Local Government.

promotion of a regional concept, the 'Northern Way', which encompassed most of the core cities, and encouraged them to create city region arenas within an overarching umbrella ((Gonzalez, 2006), Deas 2006, Counsell and Haughton 2006).

As many have commented, the concepts of growth areas and of the Northern Way led towards a stronger national spatial focus for major urban development investment initiatives, but with very little specific place development content or even a significant political base. Both can be seen as concepts of momentary political convenience, having leverage in English centralised government in so far as they affected decisions about public investment priorities. Meanwhile, the national Treasury was continually exerting pressure for more attention to providing space for economic development and housing in the growth areas, justified by the national need to promote economic growth (see (Barker, 2004). By early 2006, the Sustainable Communities Plan and the Northern Way were being overtaken by the momentum of the 'city region' idea, which played more into the arguments for 'economic competitiveness', and by the 'new localism' agenda, which would devolve more financial and programmatic autonomy to municipalities and associations of municipalities (Corry and Stoker, 2002), www.nlgn.org.uk). Models from other European countries and from the US are frequently 'called up' in these arguments. By the end of 2006, the 'city region' concept itself was losing momentum as political responsibilities changed at national level, and the 'new localism' agenda gathered force¹⁰.

The content and institutional nature of the 'city region' idea as it is currently reverberating around English sub-national political and administrative arenas is still fluid, open and contested (see, for example, (Harding et al., 2004), (Clark, 2005), (Balls et al., 2006). The dominant arguments emphasise the significance of 'cities' as innovative locales for economic development and 'city region' arenas as institutional sites for settling disputes between competing municipalities and focusing on projects which will have a major economic development pay off. At issue is the extent to which, as a generality, being located in a city promotes economic innovation, as well as the relation between any such linkages and formal government arrangements. However, the thrust of the economic argument for some kind of formal city region

¹⁰ A much-heralded 'White Paper' in October 2006 discusses 'city region' arrangements, but as possibilities to emerge from a strengthened local government (DCLG 2006).

arena clearly separates the city region level from that of municipalities, and all kinds of neighbourhood political and management arrangements for the promotion of liveability and environmental sustainability. As a result, there is considerable tension between the 'new localism' campaign and the concept of a 'city region' focus (see NLGN 2005, Lyons 2006). Even within the 'core cities' campaign, therefore, there is no clear co-alignment between 'bottom-up' calls for more integrated policy agendas, often linked to 'sustainable development' considerations, and top-down initiatives, which emphasise the economic 'dividend' (Jones and MacLeod, 2005). Despite much rhetoric about 'integrated' policy agendas, so far there has been little sign of the development of locally-specific place development strategies which bring into conjunction the social, environmental and economic dimensions of the 'place development' of 'city regions'. Such local debates tend to be crowded out by struggles over the re-configuration of the English state, both as regards sub-national jurisdictions and general principles of distributive justice.

The 'city region' idea thus emerged as a useful policy concept to occupy an institutional space left by the perceived failure of political devolution to regions and in advance of an as-yet-unfulfilled commitment to substantial devolution to municipalities. It is mobilising attention among political lobbyists. Sub-regional groupings formed earlier are re-badging themselves as city regions, and new alliances are appearing in the growth areas to mobilise energy in the competition for growth area funding¹¹. In some areas, these funding-capture mobilisations are generating the creation of institutional arenas within which substantial attempts are being made to develop area-specific, integrated place development agendas. But the 'city region' as currently 'summoned up' in English debate is a thin and unstable policy concept, with a narrow agenda, and considerable tensions between selectivity (just a few city regions?) and universality (a new pattern of municipal government?) (see HoC 2007). National government is no longer contemplating imposing formal city regions, indicating instead that informal alliances might be a way forward (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006). To quote Jonas et al (2005:240):

'... attempts to collapse the motives for city-regionalisation around a uniform and rational set of responses to economic competitiveness imposed from

¹¹ This is evident in the news items of the weekly magazine, *Planning*.

above ignores the variety of arenas of struggle around competing strategies or ideas of the city-region, conceived as a functional-territorial collective'

City regions and re-configuring sub-national governance

Structurally, these experiences reinforce the argument that concepts of 'city region' and 'metropolitan region' have emerged in Europe primarily in the context of a move away from the verticality of welfare state organisation towards a variety of institutional sites in which different groupings of state and non-state actors come together (Brenner 2004, Gualini 2006, Keating 1997, MacLeod 1999). But how the struggles over such re-configurations play out in different nation states and in different parts of nation states depends on all kinds of specific contingencies. The 'city region' concept is neither a well-developed package which can be inserted into a government system to fix and re-configure sub-national government. Nor is it an empty vessel, to be filled with whatever content seems locally appropriate. It is a concept which suggests both an institutional site and a spatial focus but exactly what kind of site and what kind of 'place focus' it carries depends on all kinds of contingencies.

In both the examples reviewed above, 'city/metropolitan regions' have been promoted primarily for political-administrative and economic reasons. In England, they have not been attached to a broadly-based or localised integrated place development agenda. In the Netherlands, an integrated conception of place development has a deeper history, but the work of creating an informal metropolitan region alliance in the Amsterdam area was not strongly linked to this. The 'summoning up' of the 'city region' idea emerges from these accounts as a pre-occupation of policy elites – politicians, policy advisers and activists, and those involved in the various governance networks surrounding the formal arenas of the state¹². Few outside these networks have much interest, apart from some business lobby groups. Nor is there much connection to socio-political movements linked to asserting regional identities. There are in both countries, however, significant citizen concerns about qualities of place, about 'liveability' issues and about environmental sustainability. In other words, there exist

¹² Motte 2006 comes to a similar conclusion with respect to the French experience.

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3 localised conceptions of place development, which are summoned up when these
4 concerns are expressed. Sometimes, the political response to such concerns is to
5 address these in terms of national programmes, such as safety and crime reduction
6 measures. But these concerns also surface routinely in the arenas of planning systems
7 and in contestation over development proposals. It is here that a localised, multi-
8 dimensional ‘politics of place’ is to be found, if fragmented and episodic.
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16 The challenges such a politics generates have the potential to set pressures for some
17 kind of integrated area development approach, which can find a way through
18 competing social, economic and environmental agendas as these affect place qualities
19 and experiences. In the Netherlands, municipalities and sub-municipal units provide
20 well-developed sites through which these different agendas could come together.
21 There are also many examples, in both urban and rural areas, of the formation of
22 municipal alliances around managing and developing place assets. In England,
23 municipalities are currently much weaker and much more dependent on national
24 government. There are all kinds of ‘partnerships’ designed to draw different agencies
25 and municipalities together, some with a richer and more integrated place
26 development focus than others. But these are all strongly structured by a vertical
27 dependency on national funding and the criteria which drive different national funding
28 regimes. What may start as an ‘integrated place development’ initiative can all too
29 easily, in such contexts, become reduced to a ‘funding capture’ game. Top-down
30 regionalisation initiatives tend to emphasise either one dimension of place
31 development (especially the economic) or the search for administrative efficiencies.
32 They have been only weakly linked to citizens’ concerns about place qualities.
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48 These experiences suggest that bottom-up regionalisation initiatives, perhaps around a
49 ‘city region’ concept, may emerge from local attempts to arrive at a more integrated
50 place development approach, through the creation of alliances and co-operation
51 agreements. But their capacity may be limited unless either higher levels of
52 government leave sufficient space for local momentum to develop or there is very
53 powerful local mobilisation. This suggests that any promotion of the idea of a ‘city
54 region’ as an institutional arena needs to be left as a ‘soft institutional form’, possibly
55 supported by enabling legislation, rather than introduced as an imposed formal
56 arrangement. This seems to have been appreciated in more recent thinking in both the
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Amsterdam area, and in recent national proposals for English local government. Without real and enduring devolution to local governments in England, as the Lyons Report (2006) and its various predecessors over the years have emphasised¹³, building local governance capacity to develop and pursue place development agendas which can resolve the conflicts and tensions between competing conceptions of place qualities is very difficult¹⁴.

In such contexts, the relations and identities emphasised in the current promotion of 'city region' initiatives, in Europe at least, are primarily those of government agencies. They relate to struggles over 'funding capture'. The language of local identity and of integrated, strategy-focused place development may be used in these struggles, but with little connection to either a deep understanding of the ongoing dynamics of the complex intersecting and co-existing of multiple relations in particular places, or to the potential development of 'place politics' in the wider society. This is particularly so in England. The Netherlands experience suggests that more local autonomy, adequate municipal funding and a more positive identity of citizens with governments, both national and local, may generate the capacity for broadly-based and integrated place development strategies. But even in the Amsterdam area, current changes in national development funding tend to cultivate a project-driven, public sector politics rather than building connections with the economy and civil society. This suggests that a critical missing ingredient in the debates over government reconfiguration and institutional design is an active debate about what locally-specific, endogenously grounded but exogenously positioned, place development strategies might look like.

The policy discourses of 'economic competitiveness', 'sustainable development' and 'social innovation' all point to the importance of coherent place development strategies as a valuable mobilising and co-ordinating force in developing more

¹³ See www.lyonsinquiry.org.uk. There was a major review of local government in the 1960s, which led to changes in the 1970s, with further reviews and changes in the 1980s and 1990s.

¹⁴ Many criticise the capacity of municipalities, arguing that they are too introverted and competitive with each other to see 'the wider picture', and that the quality of staff and politicians is poor. This criticism has been voiced in England since the 1930s. It is partly a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Lyons points out. Limited autonomy and strong dependency on national funding and practice rules limits the development of local capacity. It also reflects a fear at the national level of local authorities which pursue agendas which are different from that of the national government.

horizontal governance forms, less driven by national state agendas, and more open to influences from economic and civil society relational nexuses. But in current European debates, there is often too much generalised rhetoric and too little endogenous development. In this context, the ‘city region’ idea may be useful, both as a concept to focus attention on an array of social, economic and environmental relations, and as an institutional possibility. The danger of the idea is that it becomes a generalised solution, to be inserted into a re-organisation of sub-national government or a requirement in funding rules. This is unlikely to produce the local mobilisation and embedding which could energise and focus a vigorous, locally-specific, multi-facetted politics of place. Where there is significant decentralisation of power and resources to local governments, there are real incentives to mobilise locally, creating place development alliances, rather than channelling local concerns into vertical relations dependent on national funding flows and regulatory power.

This argument implies that the promotion of ‘city regions’ should avoid being presented as a political and/or jurisdictional fix. Instead, it may be more helpful to promote integrated place development agendas, informed by an open-minded conception of the diversity and complexity of the social, economic and environmental relations which interweave through an area and generate its place qualities. An open-minded conception means paying attention to the complex relations which connect one place with another, and could lead to the development of all kinds of alliances and partnerships. Through such initiatives, institutional arenas, whether informal or formal, are co-produced with place-specific development content. Rather than promoting ‘city regions’ as an ‘institutional fix’, it is perhaps more helpful in the current Western European context, to use the idea of a ‘city region’ as a focusing device, to help in the wider project of turning attention away from narrow policy agendas, towards nurturing and cultivating the positive synergies of co-existence in shared spaces. Such a re-focusing is much needed, to help release an open-minded, multi-facetted ‘politics of place’ to counterbalance hyper-centralism, narrow sectoral agendas and introverted localism. The ‘city region’ concept is not so useful as a political-administrative institutional ‘insert’ designed to ‘fix’ deep-seated anomalies in the sub-national constitution of nation states.

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