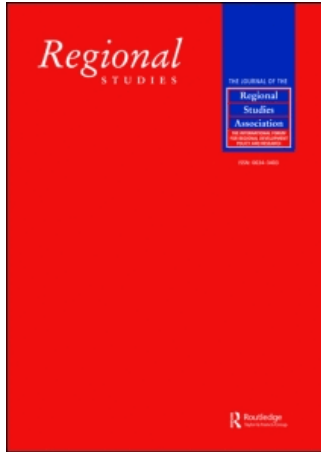


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'Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible'. Moving Towards 'Strong' Sustainable Development in an Old Industrial Region?

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'Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible'. Moving Towards 'Strong' Sustainable Development in an Old Industrial Region?

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CHATTERTON P. (2002) 'Be realistic: demand the impossible'. Moving towards 'strong' sustainable development in an old industrial region?, *Reg. Studies* 36, 552–561. The term sustainable development provides useful guidance on how economic development can be reconciled with protecting the natural environment and meeting social objectives. However, this rather tricky term is open to a number of interpretations ranging from strong/ecological to weak/technocratic. In the context of an old industrial region, evidence of movement towards strong sustainable development in four areas is discussed: radicalising democracy; promoting the local social economy; meeting basic needs; and encouraging biodiversity. The article explores why, in the light of sustained evidence of multiple social and environmental crises, these messages of strong, ecological sustainable development continue to be ignored and marginalized in formulating policy at the regional level.

Ecology Radical democracy Sustainable development Regional policy

FROM WEAK TO STRONG SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

While there has been for some time a growing awareness from academics, practitioners and activists alike of a convergence of multiple social and ecological crises across the globe (see, for example, MEADOWS *et al.*, 1972; SCHUMACHER, 1973; WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT (WCED), 1987; BROWN *et al.*, 2000), there is less agreement on how they should be tackled. The rather tricky notion of sustainable development has emerged to provide some guidance on how economic development can be reconciled with the need to conserve natural resources, protect the environment and meet social objectives (GIBBS, 1996). However, there is now widespread recognition that the term sustainable development contains a number of competing and often contradictory ideas and approaches (REDCLIFT, 1987; WILLERS, 1994; REES, 1995; GIBBS, 1997) and that while a 'green tinge' is now widespread throughout society, the depth of that green colour varies considerably (O'RIORDAN, 1992).

It is not the intention of this article to explore in detail the underlying assumptions of different approaches to sustainable development as this has been covered elsewhere (GIBBS *et al.*, 1998; PEARCE *et al.*, 1989; TURNER 1993; PEARCE and BARBER, 2000). Briefly though, a number of ideal types of sustainable development can be discerned ranging from technocratic 'weak' through to ecocentric 'strong' ones. In

general, these two positions represent divergent paradigms: a dominant social paradigm of expansionist or growth economics based upon maintaining current capitalist relations; and a 'new paradigm' based upon sustainable or steady-state economics which is rooted in deep ecological thought (O'RIORDAN, 1992; REES, 1995; SATTERTHWAIT, 1999; DOUTHWAITE, 1996, 1999). In other words, there is the largely reformist position of environmentalism, 'a managerial approach to environmental problems, secure in the belief that they can be solved without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production and consumption' and the more radical ideology of ecologism, which 'presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the non-human natural world, and in our mode of social and political life' (DOBSON, 2000, p. 2).

For deeper green thinkers, sustainable development means much more than the 'sustainability' of the present economic and social system. Rather, it refers to a specific mode of development distinct from that of 'capitalism' (DOBSON, 2000). Such a mode of development is underpinned by a number of features. First, strong or ecological sustainability is not simply a policy add-on but concerns achieving an 'ecology of change' which includes transforming every sector from farming to transport, every level from the household to the international community and every feature of life, from consumption to production (ROBERTSON, 1998, p. 19). Further, ecological or steady-state economics, as opposed to expansionist economics, underpin strong sustainability. 'Sustainable development therefore makes

sense for the economy but only if understood as development without growth' (DALY, 1996, p. 193). Sustainable development, then, is not the same as sustainable growth, but is based upon the preservation of human, natural and social capital for future generations and regards the human economy as a fully contained, dependent, integral subsystem of the eco-sphere (DALY and COSTANZA, 1992). It is based upon establishing the ecological limits and the carrying capacity of the global and local environment, a local embedding of the economy (HANSSON and WACKERNAGEL, 1999) and a withdrawal from the global market economy in favour of production for need and quality of life. In essence, it is about rethinking the economy along ecological lines (LIPIETZ, 1992). Strong sustainability also entails understanding the links between high levels of consumption and production in advanced economies and underdevelopment in the south and working towards a 'fair shares' society and trading system on a global scale (SATTERTHWAITE, 1999).

Consequently, it is based upon redefining 'development' and using alternative indicators to measure progress. Examples exist, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) and the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), which have been used in the US, UK, Italy, Sweden, Austria and Chile to highlight that when long term environmental damage and social inequalities are taken into account, real growth is much less than Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shows. DOUTHWAITE, 1999, for example, has outlined how increases in GDP over the last half century in Britain have occurred in parallel with a deterioration in almost every other social indicator (e.g. suicides, unemployment, homelessness, crime).

The purpose of this article is to explore why, in the light of sustained evidence of multiple social and environmental crises and the declining ability of national governments to equitably steer the global economy, the messages of strong, ecological sustainable development continue to be ignored and marginalized in formulating policy. The article seeks to address this question at the regional level, which since the late 1990s has become a focus for the development and implementation of a coherent policy framework for sustainability in the UK. The intention here is to discuss four strands of sustainable development which have resonance with those involved in the processes of regional development, namely: radicalising democracy; promoting the local social economy; meeting basic needs; and encouraging biodiversity. These four strands provide the beginnings of an alternative agenda to the UK government's four-fold definition of sustainable development (see below).

The focus is the North East of England, an old industrial region in the UK, which according to many conventional economic measures is one of the country's most economically lagging regions. An old industrial region such as the North East throws up a number of

specific issues for understanding why strong sustainability remains marginal, such as the legacy of industrial paternalism and labourism, lack of civic participation, geographical insularity, and the 'global' priorities of current economic strategies. Rather than offering a definitive account or concrete policy recommendations, this article is written in the spirit of stimulating debate with the aim of raising a number of currently marginalized but nonetheless important, more ecological and people-centred ideas for regional development agendas. Considering the mass of evidence concerning rising social and spatial inequalities and environmental degradation, the realistic option is to demand, more vociferously, policies, practices and finances which promote radical social and economic change.

THINKING THROUGH STRONG SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AN OLD INDUSTRIAL REGION

The developing regional framework in the UK has taken on board the idea of sustainable development (UK ROUNDTABLE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, 2000). As the White Paper on Sustainable Development (DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS (DETR), 1999, par. 7.81) commented, 'at a regional level in England, sustainable development will have a place in all strategic documents produced by public bodies' and most high level regional strategies such as the Regional Economic Strategies, Regional Planning Guidance and Regional Structure Plans have adopted the rhetoric of sustainable development. Most recently, following recommendations from the UK government's White Paper on sustainable development (DETR, 1999), roundtables have emerged at the regional level to formulate regional sustainable development strategies.

There are many reasons why this regional scale for sustainability makes sense. First, there is some convergence between geographical units such as the UK standard regions and discrete natural, or ecological regions based upon, for example, climate, vegetation or physical features which have traditionally delineated human societies (CLAVAL, 1998). Second, the regional scale, at least in the UK, offers an appropriate scale for the management of various resources such as water, energy and waste. Further, issues such as food production, transport systems, employment, education, training and tourism can be thought through at the regional level. All of this is underpinned by a sense of community, identity and culture which can often be discerned within particular regions.

However, by and large policy innovations at the regional level have marginalized the more radical implications of sustainable development. One of the main reasons for this is that: 'The political reality of regional policy reveals a paradox between planning

policy, directed to achieve sustainable development, and economic and regeneration policy which is dependent on competitively attracting inward investment' (FRIENDS OF THE EARTH (FoE), 1998, p. 1). In particular, regional policy for sustainable development has adopted the UK government's four-fold definition of sustainable development which comprises, not unproblematically, maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment with social progress which meets the needs of everyone, effective protection of the environment, and finally, prudent use of natural resources.

From the perspective of stronger, deep green, interpretations of sustainability, such definitions throw up some basic contradictions, mainly as they blend policy objectives with different goals, methods and philosophical starting points. The following quotes are typical of the disjuncture between green thought on the one hand, and mainstream sustainable development policy on the other: while DALY, 1996, p. 192, states that 'it is impossible for the world economy to grow itself out of poverty and environmental degradation' the UK government's White Paper on Sustainable Development claims that 'for the UK to move towards more sustainable development, we need more growth not less' (DETR, 1999, par. 3.31). Moreover, use of the government definitions of sustainable development means that few of the tenets of the 'development project' (OXAAL *et al.*, 1985; ESCOBAR, 1995) can be questioned by current regional policy debates. This is a concern considering that:

The shift to sustainable development is primarily an ethical shift. It is not a technological fix, nor a matter of new financial investment. It is a shift in values such that nature is valued in itself and for its life support functions, not merely for how it can be converted into resources and commodities to feed the engine of economic growth (KOTHARI, 1995, p. 250).

In contrast to the UK government's four-fold definition, the rest of this article outlines four aspects of strong sustainability in the context of an old industrial region. It also discusses what kind of movement there is towards strong sustainable development, and suggests reasons why these four aspects continue to be marginalized in regional policy.

EXTENDING DEMOCRACY, RADICALIZING PARTICIPATION

The first and most fundamental tenet of strong sustainable development is that it is more than a set of policy levers – it implies a process which has wide ranging implications for the 'how' and the 'who' of politics and decision making. In this sense, it is a deeply political, as well as an economic and environmental, concept which challenges the legitimacy of the top-down parliamentary system, the entrenched power of

established power brokers, and the abdication of personal and community control to increasingly distant and corporate-influenced political structures (MONBIOT, 2000). Drawing upon a long communalist tradition based upon broad participation, consultation and debate, ecocentrics have for many years pointed to the need for a radical restructuring and localization of democratic structures (SCHUMACHER, 1973; SALE, 1985; BOOKCHIN, 1992). Green thought in particular stresses the need for change in our individual political actions.

The basis for more radical participatory forms of democracy have a somewhat fragmented basis at the local and regional level today in the UK. However, a range of groups play a role here, such as residents associations, parish councils, youth, ethnic, women's and church groups, credit unions, Local Agenda 21 groups, residents associations, and workers and housing co-operatives. Moreover, collective forms of self-government are being extended through, for example, community councils and citizens' assemblies or forums. With greater financial support and empowerment, such local groups can increase community capacity for autonomous decision making.

In many instances, democratic processes are radicalised and widened through grassroots and popular organizations and movements which seek change not through traditional parliamentary politics and representative democracy but through 'direct democracy' (DELLA PORTA and DIANI, 1998; KLEIN, 2000). Several examples exist in the North East such as an eighteen-year long campaign which eventually defeated proposals for a nuclear power station at Druridge Bay (GUBBINS, 1997) and more recently, the 'BanWaste' group in Newcastle which forced the local authority into a public inquiry concerning its plans for expanding 'energy from waste' municipal waste combustion. The issue for those who claim to take sustainable development seriously is how they respond, in policy terms, to the growing numbers and demands of non-governmental organizations, citizen movements, protest and direct action groups. The strong sustainable development agenda requires a more complex set of governance arrangements (MURDOCH, 1997) and highlights that regional governance is up for grabs.

These more radical democratic and participatory messages of sustainable development find little fertile ground in the English regions due to the centralized nature of decision making in the UK. In particular, policy on sustainable development in the North East is largely being put into place by established 'policy partnership networks' (CHATTERTON and STYLE, 2001) whose task is to deliver the central government's 'one size fits all' approach to policy (MARQUAND and TOMANEY, 2000). These policy networks are generally understood as part of a broader restructuring of institutional arrangements over the last few decades as a

response to perceived inadequacies of both excessive market-based and state-dependent strategies and demands from citizens for more active involvement in policy making (GARMISE and REES, 1997). However, whether such restructuring represents a reinvigoration of governance or a form of local crisis management is open to debate. More realistically, such network arrangements largely signify attempts by central government to reassert control over the local-regional economic development process (JACOBS, 1997) and largely marginalize radical possibilities by setting the agenda of what the public can 'think is possible' (ATKINSON, 1999). One of the reasons why policy networks have a limited view of what is 'possible' is that they typically have a high proportion of members from the business community, and hence are business-led. Yet understandably, it is difficult for the business community to take on board the messages of strong sustainable development, especially amongst the more volatile SME (small and medium sized enterprises) sector. As one small business representative commented: 'if we're not in business today, we can't save the environment tomorrow'.

Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), which play a major role in such policy networks, have provided the main impetus for a more regionally-based sustainable development policy framework. However, while the RDAs have adopted the language of sustainability, it has been progressively watered down in the move from policy formulation to implementation (GIBBS, 1998). Further, the predominance of established and business-led interests on the boards of RDAs renders sustainable development subsidiary to the overall aim of regional economic growth (GIBBS *et al.*, 1998; HAMS and CHRISTIE, 1998). Considering the limited capacity for RDAs to develop innovative, independent policy outside the wider priorities of central government, it is not surprising that the messages of strong sustainability are marginalized. In effect, RDAs are a vehicle for how regional activity can contribute to the UK government's definition of sustainable development rather than how sustainable development can be formulated to meet regional circumstances. In such a context of continued vested interests, it is not difficult to see why strong sustainability messages are at best paid lip service, or at worst, simply ignored.

Radicalizing democratic structures is not a simple process in an old industrial region such as the North East where longstanding political and sectoral interests have had a strong bearing on policy directions for a number of decades. While the RDA in the North East, OneNorthEast, has brought a new political dynamic to the region, there is little evidence to suggest that it has the capacity or commitment to develop more ecologically-grounded policies for sustainability. In this sense, it still heavily promotes the jargon of cluster-based, high-skilled, knowledge-driven activity in a globalized economy. Nevertheless, the growing

momentum for political autonomy and a directly-elected assembly in the North East (TOMANEY, 1999) could create space for interests groups currently marginalized within policy making, especially those from the community, environment and voluntary sectors, to more directly influence decision making structures.

DEVELOPING THE LOCAL SOCIAL ECONOMY

The case against the free-market, global economy and for a local social economy has been stated voraciously in recent years (MANDER and GOLDSMITH, 1996; DOUTHWAITE, 1996, 1999; SHIVA, 2000) and has recently been reinforced by citizen movements and indigenous groups throughout the world in a growing inventory of international protests against the architects of the global economy such as the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Zapatistas in the Chiapas state of Mexico have become a well-established and well-known example of those making the case against the global economy (STYLE, 2000). At the heart of the strong ecological model of sustainable development, then, is a shift in direction for economic activity from global dependence to local interdependence (NORBERG-HODGE, 1996) and the creation of meaningful, humane employment which revalues time and skills outside the global market place, especially those deployed in the household and voluntary economy. Moreover, possibilities of generating employment outside the global market place are taken seriously (DOUTHWAITE, 1996), as are longstanding debates concerning the conversion of socially and environmentally dubious industries (WAINWRIGHT and ELLIOTT, 1982).

In his book *Short Circuit*, subtitled *Strengthening Local Economies for Security in an Unstable World* (1996), Douthwaite outlines that, in the current market economy, a large proportion of the population have become dependent on a single highly unstable economic system and have lost the ability and means to provide for themselves. Underpinning this is a global system of trade rules implemented by unelected organizations such as the WTO who restrict practices which protect domestic producers and encourage preferential local trading. As a result of such international trade laws, most economic sectors are dominated by large corporate interests who use the benefits of economics of scope and scale to systematically drive down prices and out-compete local firms. In this context, DOUTHWAITE, 1996, speaks of the need to build parallel, independent economies in which underused skills are directed towards meeting unmet needs, where key production processes are run with less dependency on inputs from the global market economy and where greater monetary independence and financial stability

can act as a 'protective skin' against the instability of the market economy. While the alleged 'greening' of economic activity through local clusters of sub-contracting SMEs, greener production technologies and smaller and more flexible production units may have a number of environmental benefits, in few cases do they actually promote a local social economy. In particular, they do little to advocate a new consumption regime based around lower-impact lifestyles or localize ownership and power (GIBBS, 1996; PIKE and TOMANEY, 1999).

Many ideas about generating local economic activity have been taken up through the idea of the 'social economy' and the 'third sector' which have emerged to fill the gaps left by the erosion of stable employment and the welfare state in the wake of restructuring in western economies. While definitions of the social economy are not clearcut and straddle different sectors, organizations in the social economy are distinct from the market economy in that they have an ethical purpose and they are people- rather than investment-centred (AHLQUIST, 1999). In the light of continuing jobless growth and job losses in the North East, there has been a renewed interest in the role of the social economy in regenerating the region. A recent strategy for developing the region's third sector, for example, calculated that it comprises some 40,000 organizations which employ between 5% and 9% of the regional workforce (UNISON, 2000).

Community finance initiatives (CFIs) underpin the local social economy and it is estimated that in the UK they serve around half a million people, are worth £400 million and they have risen fourfold over the last decade (ROGALY *et al.*, 1999). One of the fastest growing areas is Credit Unions which offer micro-credit to common bond communities (geographical or workplace communities), help decrease reliance on central banks and, where mainstream banking facilities have withdrawn, can aid in keeping economic resources within the community. Across the North East, community credit unions tend to be concentrated in low-income areas, are relatively small scale and not yet able to function self-sufficiently. Moreover, alternative currency systems such as Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) and Time Banks, which have emerged in most parts of the world, are an important element in matching local skills and needs, and keeping currency in the local community (NORTH, 1999). In light of the demise of regional sources of finance and the withdrawal of banks from many low income localities in the North East, such alternative currency systems can play an important role in regeneration.

However, there are clear reasons why such debates on the local social economy have not found stronger resonance in the North East. Over the last few decades, greater global integration, especially through greater foreign direct investment (FDI), has been regarded as an effective tool for overcoming widespread

manufacturing job loss and economic peripherality. However, such an approach has proved precarious. While in the last 20 years, externally controlled manufacturing activity has accounted for around 66,000 new jobs, the late 1990s saw a spate of closures and a flight of foreign capital with around 5,000 jobs lost in 1998 alone (PIKE, 1999). Moreover, recent service growth in the region has not provided stable jobs in large numbers and has done little to provide employment for the long term unemployed. Exogenously-focused development and the attraction of inward investment and high-order functions remain the core component of the region's strategy. In such a context, community economic development and the third economy continue to be regarded as compensatory measures for poorer communities rather than as central elements of regional development strategies. Moreover, leaders in the North East have, justifiably, responded to the continuing poor economic performance of the region with a 'jobs at all cost' approach and, as a result, areas such as the environment receive little serious attention as a viable source of employment or income.

The challenge for policy makers in old industrial areas like the North East is to weigh up the evidence as to how much benefit their region actually derives from its engagement with global economy. Evidence from the North East suggests that over the last few decades the continued drive towards integration will, at best, provide small numbers of volatile and often low-skilled jobs, and will do little to tackle persistent problems of under-employment and community fragmentation. In contrast, the NEW ECONOMICS FOUNDATION, 1999, has shown that in the UK around one and a half million people take part in economic activity based upon community and sustainability, or what they call the 'rainbow economy'. A priority for regional policy makers is to provide greater support and subsidies for such bottom-up, locally and co-operatively based economic activity. In the North East, recognition of this 'rainbow economy' is marginal but growing through, for example, New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal Funds and sectoral studies on the region's third sector. However, in a region so preoccupied with playing economic 'catch-up', encouraging policy makers to promote a locally and socially responsive-economy, rather than just an internationally competitive-economy, remains a significant hurdle.

MEETING BASIC NEEDS

In Western economies the productive economy is largely geared towards meeting the demands of high consumption lifestyles and producing goods for external rather than local markets. However, self-reliance in basic needs such as food and energy are primary objectives of stronger sustainable development. Although self-reliance is protectionist in that production in the

first instance is geared towards local demand, it is not isolationist nor does it entail reducing trade with the outside world. Rather self-reliance is about promoting trade out of choice rather than necessity, setting mutually agreed trade barriers where applicable and reducing long distance transport of goods. Due to space constraints, two key basic needs – food and energy – are discussed below.

Over the course of the twentieth century in the UK, self-reliant local and regional food production systems have been eroded. Modern industrial agriculture and food production which have replaced these systems have thrown up a host of problems relating to soil erosion, biodiversity, high chemical inputs, reliance on fossil energy and extensive transportation systems. As a response to these problems, alternative farming practices aimed at revitalizing local economies and protecting the environment are increasing throughout the industrialized world such as: low input and labour-intensive organic agriculture; subscription farming; local farmers markets and community-supported agriculture; box schemes linking urban consumers with nearby farmers; food co-operatives; and city farms and allotments.

Evidence of greater food self-reliance and organic food production is patchy in the North East. There is a small but expanding number of organic farms, many of which are run on co-operative lines and undertake a parallel social and educational role. However, while the government is beginning to show signs of commitment to organic agriculture, only 0.6% of the farm land in the North East is farmed organically (ERM/CURDS, 2001). There is also considerable scope to increase regional produce in the North East as the region currently has at least three times fewer regional and speciality food producers than any other region in the UK (*ibid.*).

Considering the recent problems associated with intensive, meat-based food systems in the UK, such as foot-and-mouth which hit the North East particularly hard, much more could be done to convert regional farming systems to organic status and to increase regional food systems. This is particularly appealing if one considers that small organic farms are up to 100% more labour intensive than conventional farms, and that regional food systems can generate a significant amount of employment in rural areas. Clearly there are a number of practical reasons why such ideas remain marginal. The North East is highly urbanized with 70% of the population living in cities and towns along the rivers Tyne, Tees and Wear which grew to meet the demands of traditional heavy industries. As a result, there is a strong urban bias in the region which was reflected in one council spokesperson's comments about the Council for the Protection of Rural England: 'they would have us go back to thatched cottages. We can't all have two acres and a cow' (*The Journal*, 22 September 1999, p. 12). Several challenges exist for

policy makers in the North East. Not only is there a need to move away from reliance on large-scale, externally-oriented agricultural systems and to convert rural agricultural employment to more organic, small-scale methods, but there is also a need to reconnect urban populations with food production through, for example, community gardens, allotments, city farms and techniques of permaculture (WHITEFIELD, 1997).

Second, fundamental to strong sustainability is a reduction in energy dependency and the promotion of decentralized and locally-controlled renewable energy sources such as residential combined heat and power units, community wind projects, biomass fuels, short rotation coppicing and passive solar heating. However, at the moment, meeting energy needs in the UK is largely achieved through large-scale, capital intensive projects which rely upon the importation of energy from fossil fuel sources whose prices are unstable, supplies are finite and pollution costs high.

Considering the governments' commitment to ratifying the Kyoto targets for greenhouse gas reductions, much scope exists to increase renewables in the North East. At the moment, renewable energy sources contribute less than 1% of the region's electricity generating capacity, half of which comes from the combustion of municipal waste (ERM/CURDS, 2001). The greatest potential for expanding power from alternative sources in the region comes from wind power harnessed along its eastern coastline. Significant steps have been made here, with AMEC Border Wind developing three on-shore projects and the UK's first offshore project in the North East.

However, in the region various obstacles still exist to implement some of the more radical implications of sustainability in relation to energy use and provision. In terms of wind energy, there continues to be a 'wind backlash' in the region through problems of gaining planning approval, and Nimbyist responses from local communities and preservationists. Possible solutions include developing wind units on brownfield sites and creating community turbines to increase local commitment and ownership of wind projects as experimented with in Denmark through wind-power guilds. However, in light of the North East's sustained drive for growth and the need to 'catch-up' economically with other UK regions, policies associated with reducing energy use are unlikely to find many supporters.

As the brief examples of food and energy suggest, the notion of decentralization and community ownership throw up a number of problems for current policy frameworks. In many ways, this simply reflects the marginalization of these issues at the national and even international level and the vested power which large utility companies and capital interests have in these areas. It also reflects the lack of information circulated to the public on viable alternatives. Important steps forward for policy makers in the North East include shifting subsidies from large- to smaller-scale food and

energy projects as well as greater funding for, and recognition of, the benefits of upskilling communities to meet their own needs from small-scale and decentralized activities.

PROMOTING BIODIVERSITY AND THE BIOREGION

At the heart of stronger sustainability is a greater ecological attachment to the surrounding environment and the need to promote greater biodiversity of species and habitats. The concept of bio-regionalism has a strong part to play in this. Bioregions emphasize community and local knowledge and seek to achieve self-sufficiency within an ecologically coherent or 'natural' region (SALE, 1985; MCGINNIS, 1998, DOBSON, 2000). Perhaps one of the most useful contributions of this bio-regional perspective is that we have to (re)gain an understanding of 'place' in terms of its resources, capacities, cultures and history by rejecting the 'industrial-scientific paradigm', and become what SALE, 1985, called 'dwellers in the land'. A bioregional economy would seek to establish a stable means of production within its ecological limits, maintain natural resources and is labour rather than energy intensive. A key aspect of these ecological limits is to carefully manage the 'ecological footprint' of each locality – the amount of biologically productive land it appropriates to meet its needs (WACKERNAGEL and REES, 1996).

Many of these arguments have found their strongest connections to large 'eco-regions' in the natural expanses of North America which have benefited from established ecological approaches to regional planning especially through the work of Lewis Mumford. What relevance do they have to smaller, more densely populated and urbanized UK regions? The North East region contains some of the most sparsely populated areas in the UK and nearly one-third of the region's natural landscape is officially designated and protected. However, the region's environment faces particularly acute problems as it is the second most polluted region in the UK, much of which is allied to certain industrial sectors such as the chemical industry and confined to certain sub-regions such as Teesside (FoE, 1999). In such a context, numerous initiatives have emerged to protect the region's natural environment and its biodiversity. Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) have been formulated at the national, local and company level and several local authorities in the North East have, or are in the process of, preparing them. Moreover, a Regional Biodiversity Forum has been established which is working on a Regional Biodiversity Audit and Strategy to raise the biodiversity agenda in other regional strategy documents.

Ideas such as biodiversity and the bioregion remain marginal within mainstream regional policy for a number of reasons. First, biodiversity is being taken forward in the North East in a rather 'enclavist' way. Initiatives

such as City Farms, wildlife and nature parks, community forests/gardens and urban nature parks are being promoted, but the challenge for strong sustainability is for such initiatives to play a central, driving, rather than bolt-on, role in regional development. Wildlife habits and species are often compromised, and destroyed, by the shorter term imperatives of economic catch-up. Moreover, tricky issues such as the lack of green techniques within the construction industry, the use of greenbelt policies and the balance between central, inner-city and suburban development, are all key issues to address.

Second, what counts as a region is complicated by numerous and overlapping definitions based upon, for example, labour markets, transport infrastructures, resource use or those used by the Government Offices, the Environment Agency and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). Standard UK regions are not in any explicit way connected to natural bioregions or georegions based around watersheds, mountain ranges or vegetation patterns. In this sense, standard regions are not suitable boundaries for exploring the idea of ecological bioregions, considering most are complex, globally-interconnected and highly urbanized landscapes with populations of several million inhabitants. Finally, current policy frameworks at the regional, national and European level which give primacy to the knowledge-based economy and the efficacy of global markets, present clear barriers to such nature-centred ideas. Clearly, a broader perceptual change is required to shift current thinking from social or economic regions towards natural regions. As directly-elected regional governance structures gain momentum, opportunities arise to take seriously the ecological and natural contexts, boundaries and limits of their regions.

PROSPECTS

With the examples discussed above in mind, what are the prospects for the North East in terms of moving towards a model of development based upon broad participation, promoting local economic activity, meeting basic needs and a greater connection with nature? In light of the failure of orthodox growth strategies and continued problems of economic disinvestment, social marginalization and environmental degradation, it would seem apt to develop alternative ways of organizing employment, creating wealth, using natural resources and providing community services. The examples discussed, although small in scale, diffuse and underfunded represent new openings and ways to 'get out of this capitalist place' (GIBSON-GRAHAM, 1996, p. 13) especially in terms of allowing people to regain some decision making over their economic life. Yet very little is still known about the full range, impact and potential of projects promoting strong sustainability.

However, there remain many reasons why the North

East is currently infertile ground for a sea change of thought and action. First, it is vital to comprehend that while debates on strong sustainability remain marginal at the national and international levels, it is difficult to incorporate them into policy at the local and regional levels. Second, since they continue to be treated as add-ons rather than central motifs in the region's policy making, there are a lack of incentives at the individual or firm level to confront issues which require wider lifestyle and ethical shifts.

Third, if sustainable development is to be of any analytical or policy benefit, some basic contradictions and difficulties within different versions of the term have to be acknowledged by policy makers. In particular, it is vital to understand that sustainable development's most radical policy message requires a wholesale rethink of the development project as it demands a more humane, people-centred, ecological and localized economy (SACHS, 1993; ROBERTSON, 1998; DOUTHWAITE, 1999). This problem is confounded by a lack of mechanisms to encourage debate on the wider implications of sustainable development. As a result, there are few opportunities to reconcile, or at least unpack, ideological and language differences between various groups especially those between the business and the environmental communities. In this sense, the North East lacks widespread civic participation and forums for discussion on key issues such as sustainable development. The North East, like many old industrial regions, has a legacy of paternalism, industrial labourism and parochialism which continues to inhibit new ideas and marginalizes alternative views. In particular, the economic peripherality of the region has locked it into a 'jobs at all costs' outlook which reduces the debate on sustainable development to purely environmental issues.

Finally, at its core, strong sustainability is a concept which is defined through practice rather than policy. In many of the areas outlined in this article, ideas, projects and skills already exist and are being developed, but the problem is the lack of support for, and information on, what people can actually achieve at the local and regional level. The challenge remains to increase access to information and funding streams which promote the *practice* of strong sustainability. Education, and in particular environmental education and eco-literacy, play a key role in realizing this. However, the present education system still treats many environmental issues as an add-on rather than a central aspect of the learning process.

Sustainable development is on the agenda and both UK and Regional Roundtables on Sustainable Development have at least begun a useful debate on key issues and problems. What is less clear is whether the types of activity outlined in this article add up to an

evolutionary shift towards a more sustainable regional policy, or whether they will be merely incorporated into existing models. As this article has outlined, much is happening on the ground to promote stronger sustainable development, and hence there is a base for a greener regional policy. Further, the unfolding regional political framework in the UK provides new possibilities for implementing more locally-based and ecologically-sensitive development. For example, a fully-elected regional assembly in the North East would provide opportunities for groups involved in strong sustainability to ensure that their ideas are incorporated into development agendas. Such groups need to formulate a strong and coherent voice to get their message on the table.

However, evidence of take-up of strong versions of sustainability within current mainstream regional policy is not encouraging. Policy makers on sustainable development are struggling to come to terms with the implications of weak sustainability such as environmental taxes, pollution control, green business practices and recycling, never mind those groups pursuing a deeper green agenda. North East leaders, like those from other regions based upon pro-growth development trajectories, are a long way from accepting a new development paradigm based upon a more equitable relationship between humans, animals and nature (DOBSON, 2000). As long as sustainable development remains bound by central government and their official representatives in localities and regions, it will continue to be a shorthand for 'business as usual' and closely bound up with the policy imperatives of growth and competitiveness. Movement towards sustainability depends upon taking much more seriously the energies and skills of people and organizations currently outwith established policy structures who are, and have been for some time, working towards strong sustainability. The decisive challenge which still remains is the extent to which policy makers are prepared to accept this, and cede power to such groups. To these ends, real progress towards strong sustainable development in the region requires radical and wholesale changes in governance, funding and policy, rather than the incremental ones which are currently occurring.

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