

# Promoting Sustainable Development: the Question of Governance\*

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## ABSTRACT

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Despite continuing disagreement about the meaning of 'sustainable development', the so-called triple-bottom-line trajectory - which would see economic advancement being achieved alongside social equity and environmental security - is viewed as one of the promises for future progress regionally, nationally and globally. At the regional level we are witnessing various experiments in governance that cut across, challenge and undermine existing decision-making structures. They are being developed and implemented because of the perceived failure of older forms of governance to deliver sustainable development. Do these experiments represent a re-vitalisation of participatory democracy – with the inclusion of environmental and social calculations ensuring that local communities and local ecologies have stronger 'voices' in positive change? Do they represent a real devolution of power? Do they foster social inclusion? Importantly, do they challenge currently unsustainable patterns of development (those based, largely, on the continuation of productivist agriculture)?

This address will examine the 'regional experiment' that is occurring within the advanced societies, identifying the general features of the schemes, policies and programs that are being promoted to bring about sustainable development. It will examine the potential of participative processes to transform rural landscapes and will explore the contradictory nature of devolved governance in the context of centralised administrative arrangements. Finally, from a policy perspective, the talk will seek to identify the elements, and forms, of regional governance that appear to provide the best options for sustainable development.

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## Introduction

Throughout the world – and at a time when sustainable development is being viewed as a medium term imperative rather than some nebulous, hoped-for, long-term, goal - attention is being given to the improvement of natural resource management and to the livelihoods of people outside the metropolises. New policies and new forms of governance have emerged, including new institutions and policy frameworks. In Australia, my own country, as in so many countries around the world, voluntarism and self-help strategies have gone hand-in-hand with regional priority setting and decision-making in the area of environmental protection. There is an effort to address the so-called 'triple bottom line' of economy, society and environment so that economic ambitions are tempered with a respect for social equity and environmental integrity, with the economy being forced to take its place as only one of three 'elements' in the calculus of sustainable development.

Some sociologists such as Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, whose work forms part of the creatively named Real Utopias Project ('embracing the tension between dreams and practice' – see Fung and Wright, 2003: vii), consider that what we are witnessing is the emergence of empowered participatory governance. They argue that current modes of political representation are frustrating the democratic ambitions of citizens, and that a radical egalitarianism may be possible if we take seriously newly-emerging participatory opportunities afforded by such initiatives as neighbourhood councils, administrative and fiscal devolution, and stakeholder involvement in habitat conservation planning (Fung and Wright, 2003: 5).

I will argue in this address that what we are witnessing throughout the so-called advanced world are experiments in sub-national regional governance that are themselves a response to wider problems in managing global capitalism. Rather than solving the problems that are emerging, and rather than unequivocally producing a dynamic that leads to sustainable development, they appear to be generating their own tensions and contradictions – some of which will not be readily resolved within, and indeed may be exacerbated by, the structure of global neoliberalism. I will then argue that the progressive response is not to abandon notions of sustainability or regionality but to ensure that structures of governance that support sustainability are strengthened.

## Sustainable, and Unsustainable, Development

One does not need to sit in the audience of the recent film *The Day After Tomorrow* to recognise the problems that the planet faces as a result of modernisation and industrialisation. We see the signs around us. In environmental terms we now acknowledge that industrial pollution, species decline, loss of habitat, increasing demands on fresh water, the erosion of beaches and coastal lands, and global warming are directly attributable to human activity (Held,

McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton, 1999; IPCC, 2001). Perhaps more dramatically, in terms of human existence, we see the wasted lives of people who Zygmunt Bauman (2004) has described in his most recent book as the outcasts of modernity.

Since we are in Norway we should acknowledge that the first popularly-accepted definition of sustainable development arose from the report of Norwegian Gro Harlem Brundtland who, with her Commission members, suggested in 1987 that the world should be 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). It was a profound statement at the time and a strong reminder to the disposability-is-progress generation that profligacy and disregard for the environment would lead to intergenerational inequities and eventual ecosystem collapse. Of course, as a rather slippery term, sustainability can mean the maintenance of intergenerational wellbeing; ensuring the continuation of human life indefinitely; maintaining the productivity of economic systems; maintaining biodiversity; and, a combination of these (and other) things (see Gowdy, 1999: 164). It can be 'weak' or 'strong', or 'reformist' or 'radical' or be about intragenerational equity as much intergenerational equity (see Eichler, 1999; Gowdy, 1999; Gray and Lawrence, 2001). Sustainability is also seen as a 'grand narrative' in a post-modern era that itself rejects grand narratives! (Myerson and Rydin, 1996).

It seems self evident that the elements of sustainability – the economy, society and environment – are discrete and exist in some mutually exclusive way (otherwise why would they be separated in the first place?). The aim for those of us interested in an holistic understanding is to some how interconnect them. But is it as simple as this? As some writers (Giddings, Hopgood and O'Brien, 2002) have argued, they are multilayered and fractured and must, as well, be considered at different spatial levels.

In rural regions of the so-called advanced societies we have witnessed the entrenchment of productivist or 'high tech' farming systems. This is despite growing recognition that productivist agriculture is largely unsustainable (Altieri, 1998). We appear to persist with such an unsustainable production system because its continuation is logically consistent with global neoliberal or free-market policies as they are applied to farming. We are told it is the only way to do business! Hoping to survive in an increasingly competitive international marketplace farmers obey market signals and adopt the behaviour required to ensure their futures in farming. This generally means specialising in production, intensifying and expanding farm operations, and purchasing the latest products of agribusiness to gain a competitive edge through increases in productivity and efficiency (see Illbery and Bowler, 1998). Yet, the pursuit of this has devastating effects on the environment. The clearing of vegetation to bring land into production for agriculture and grazing results in topsoil loss and very often – as water tables rise – to salinisation. There is also evidence, worldwide, of overcropping and overgrazing as farmers seek to secure increases in production in the face of declining prices and poor seasons (O'Connor, 1994; Martinez-Alier, 1999; Lawrence, Cheshire and Richards, forthcoming). We also know that the products of agribusiness – in concert with management regimes that endorse or demand monocultural practices and blindly obey world market forces – are implicated in widespread environmental destruction (Magdoff, Buttel and Foster, 1998). When this is applied to Third World settings, we see how jaundiced a green revolution is for the poor of the world (McMichael, 2004). Finally, it has been argued that the current rules of global trade set by the WTO promote harmonisation as an important part of liberalisation. This translates, however, into a narrowing of choice for nation states in their attempts to deal with environmental outcomes of economic activity (Levidow, forthcoming).

Some sociologists and geographers have detected the emergence of a post-productivist and multifunctional countryside – particularly in Europe where there are pressures for continued protection of agriculture, support for local communities, along with the ‘greening’ of the Common Agricultural Policy (Holmes, 2002; Tilzey, 2003). But others (Wilson, 2001; Argent, 2002; Walford, 2003) have argued that there are only slight traces of such positive change being observed in many of the countries where environmental pollution from farming is at its worse. Nevertheless, pressured by consumers anxious about food quality, animal welfare and a host of environmental matters, there is discernable political pressure for the move to what Marsden (2003: 4) has termed a paradigm of rural sustainability, or what we have termed in Australia ‘sustainable regional development’ (Lawrence, 1998; Dore and Woodhill, 1999; Lawrence, 2003) – a form of organisation that would seek to secure sustainable livelihoods at the regional (sub national) level.

The basic argument in this talk is that the dynamic of productivism can be challenged – and potentially replaced – by triple bottom line approaches, and that these approaches might be best achieved at the regional level on the basis of partnerships between the state and communities. But a second, less optimistic, assertion is that new contradictions are emerging that might undermine the partnership approach to regional sustainability.

## **Experiments in Regional Governance and the Governance of Natural Resources**

From North America to Europe to the Antipodes there has been an enormous ‘shift’ toward decision-making at the regional level. Governance is about structures and processes that allow for strategic decision-making outside the traditional institutions and agents given power to govern (Jessop, 1998). The new governance framework is based upon the reinvention of government through multi-level partnerships, knowledge exchange, devolution of decision-making, and ‘joined up’ inter-institutional arrangements. Bureaucratic and technical accountability is seen to be steadily replaced by the building of coalitions and networks at the local level (Reddel, 2002). It is a space where there is a blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spheres and where government authority is replaced by a network of self-governing actors capable of redefining relations between institutions (Stoker, 1998). As Lovering (1999: 390) has noted, whereas in the decade of the 1980s there were over 400 regional development agencies worldwide, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were more than 4,000. He notes however that the new regionalism has all the elements of global neoliberalism (with its concerns for competition, the marketplace and business integration) rather than embodying an agenda for comprehensive regional development (Lovering, 2001).

In Europe, the devolution of authority from central governments to sub-national bodies has been a logical extension of the subsidiarity principle – that decision-making should occur at the lowest appropriate level – and it has fostered regionalism through the reliance on multi-level governance (Gleeson, 2003). Recent regional policy initiatives are concerned with sustainability of regions rather than with the more narrow concern for income and trade performance (Gleeson, 2003: 232). In the US, new alliances are forming across existing legislative boundaries with habitat conservation planning now occurring at ecosystem scales thereby bypassing statutory standards and procedures, and involving a multiplicity of people and agencies in a new arrangements of power (Karkkainen, 2003).

With the EU's LEADER Programme, a 'new localism' - the creation of integrated plans for local development and the attempt to enlist the participation of the socially marginalised - has been viewed as a direct response to rural socio-economic decline (Moseley, 1999). Although it has been based upon rural development rather than sustainability, *per se*, LEADER during the 1980s and 1990s sought to create through its Local Action Groups, and in hitherto marginalised areas, an enterprise culture, better service delivery, community empowerment and social inclusion in decision-making (Westholm, Moseley and Stenlas, 1999) – thereby anticipating what would evolve, in the new millennium, into new governance models in Europe.

In Europe, documents such as the *White Paper on Governance*, the *Environmental Action Programme*, and the *EU Sustainable Development Strategy* (see CEC, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c) embrace the need for various tiers of government to interface in a manner that promotes opportunities for integrated approaches to decision-making at the regional level and for citizen empowerment via capacity building (Berger, 2003). The EU is concerned that people are showing increasing distrust for 'distant' and faceless institutions making decisions about their lives. Local and regional bodies and governments are therefore to be involved in partnership arrangements – as part of a different set of 'policy tools' aimed at reducing the alienation and powerlessness that is perceived to be a current feature within the Union (CEC, 2001a: 7). It is asserted that inclusiveness and accountability will be achieved through the reform of governance arrangements (CEC, 2001a: 8). The two basic elements of EU policy are the inclusion of wider sections of society, and multi-level government (Berger, 2003: 231). Of course, the preoccupation with the structures of governance over process-related concerns can gloss over the politically sensitive issue of who holds power, and how – and for what purposes – that power is used.

According to Harriet Bulkeley and co-workers at the University of Durham in the UK, the development of multi-level governance (that is, involving actors and institutions from the public agencies, private businesses and civil society – and at local, state and global levels) can be seen in the emergence of what are being termed transnational municipal networks or TMNs (Bulkeley, Davies, Evans, Gibbs, Kern and Theobald, 2003). Another example is that of the so-called 'joining up' of decision-making bodies at a multi-level scale with partnerships rather than hierarchies being the new organisational framework (Geddes, 2003).

But let me take you downunder for some of the more interesting experiments in sustainable regional development. As many of you will know, Australia has a very large landmass, but is the second driest continent (after Antarctica) in the world. In the last two hundred years of white settlement, European-style agriculture, and grazing, together with tree clearing and reliance upon irrigation from unreliable river systems has created major environmental problems. The latter have included soil erosion, waterlogging, the salinisation and acidification of pastures, agro-chemical pollution of waterways, species decline and the uncontrollable spread of weeds. Perhaps, not surprisingly, many of the so-called 'weeds' have been introduced in earlier decades as the supposed solutions to productivity losses in Australian agriculture and grazing (see Gray and Lawrence, 2001).

Although State governments had been charged with the development of agriculture and the management of the environment, the Federal government recognised that if the nation were to address the quite severe problems of environmental degradation in the regions it would need to intervene. But intervention did not take a form of top down regulation. Rather, in consultation with the States, the National Farmers' Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation, the so-called Decade of Landcare was born in 1989, with the introduction of the National

Landcare Program. The aim was to stimulate the creation of locality-based community landcare groups that would take responsibility for on-the-ground actions to address environmental problems (Lockie, 2004). The Federal Government provided funding to underpin group formation, to inspire a higher level of knowledge of the environment and for such activities as tree planting, catchment planning and demonstrations of environmentally-sound practices (Campbell, 1994). The landcare experiment has exceeded expectations of government, with more than 4,000 groups comprising some 120,000 volunteer workers being established throughout the nation (see Mues et al. 1998; Lockie, 2004: 43). This represents approximately one third of Australia's farms, with many other regional stakeholders also becoming actively involved. Its success is viewed in terms of: developing 'robust' relations between state agency officials and local communities; increasing the awareness throughout the rural community of environmental issues; improving landholder skills; and, enhancing best management practices (Curtis, 2003: 447). Featuring ideals of consensus and partnership, the landcare movement is viewed by some as an example of a successful participative democratic structure that is an effective way of bringing about more sustainable development (Alexander, 1995).

As part of the new direction in community-based natural resource management, and based upon the success of landcare, Australia's Federal government endorsed the community-partnership model as greatly beneficial for Australian natural resource management (Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and Arts, 2001: 24). In 1997, the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) was initiated with \$1.5 billion in funding having been assigned to projects up until mid 2001, and with another \$1 billion being allocated to extend the scheme for another five years. This represents one of the biggest environmental investments by government in Australia's history, with its Landcare, Bushcare, Rivercare and Coastcare programs relying upon regional delivery as the primary mechanism.

Under the scheme – based on yet another model of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality - regional communities (comprising landowners, businesses, NGOs, local, State and Territory governments) will negotiate to formulate so-called Accredited Natural Resource Management Plans. These will define the most important issues for funding and, therefore, for action at the regional or catchment level.

Catchments are viewed as natural geographical structures that do not conform to State or local government boundaries. The aim, then, is to promote an environmental 'identity' across existing political boundaries and within the catchments. Limited powers are being given to regional bodies (catchment management groups and authorities) to provide leadership in natural resource management issues, undertake regional and local planning, undertake on-ground management and monitoring, and to initiate extension and capacity building exercises. While State and local governments are still required to administer land and water legislation and regulation, it is individuals, companies and various 'stakeholders' who are viewed as those who will be responsible for on-ground actions to improve the environment, and to promote regional sustainability (Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and Arts, 2001: 27).

What can be said of these Australian attempts to promote sustainable development through community?

They do represent an attempt to:

- Mobilise community and stakeholder participation and foster wider partnerships with government

- Identify the sub-state (catchment) region as the most important scale for delivery of sustainability outcomes – thereby moving beyond the structures of representative democracy (federal, State and local government)
- Highlight the need to see environmental integrity as an essential component of regional progress – thereby moving from regional economic development as the key focus to sustainable regional development as the ‘future’
- Seek to have communities develop frameworks for action that go well beyond the short-term cycles of Federal and State budgets (Curtis, 2003; Lawrence, 2003).

But, as we might expect, the success of the Australian experiment in governing sustainability must be tempered with some critical assessment. There have been five main criticisms of the voluntary governance approach to sustainability in Australia:

- Landcare was deemed a ‘success’ with one-third of primary producers being involved. Some have asked – ‘who are these people’ and ‘what about the other two thirds’? In some cases landcare groups formed to block the entry of environmental, and other, stakeholders in decision-making. In other words, some people and groups were deliberately excluded from landcare activities (Morrissey and Lawrence, 1997). In some areas, the majority of producers could be involved in quite profound soil, water and biodiversity destruction, with their involvement in landcare no more than an ideological shield to help protect them against the widespread criticism that might otherwise have ensued
- There is evidence that governments, through the new NRM initiatives, are devolving responsibility, rather than *power*. Some NRM groups devise regional plans and priorities only to be told by central government that these are not the main concerns at the federal level. Powerlessness – rather than community capacity – is fostered in such circumstances. The so-called purse strings are held very tightly by central administration
- The move to partnership arrangements and the winding back of top-down forms of planning can only occur if new support structures (and people) are in place to support the new arrangements. The progress is slow and very frustrating for regional bodies that have been told they will be given a license to create a new sustainable future. The time that they are able to devote to community activities is also quite limited, with ‘burnout’ being a major problem
- Without coordination of government services in natural resource management, regional resource-use planning is being viewed as another ‘level’ of bureaucracy one which has the potential to duplicate (rather than to support and complement) current planning activities
- Finally, Landcare has as one of its mottos ‘the right environment to do business’. It is premised on the view that sustainability can be achieved within a system of agricultural productivism. Interestingly, a number of companies in its sponsorship list are implicated in some of the worst environmental destruction in Australia. It is no wonder then, that some consider Landcare and its contemporary equivalents a ‘greenwash’, allowing environmental degradation to continue while giving corporate entities public credibility in the environmental arena (see discussions in Lockie and Vanclay, 1997; Gray and Lawrence, 2001; Curtis, 2003).

It has been posited that protests against the impacts of neoliberalism and the backlash against globalisation have prompted governments to seek more participatory means of governing (Paterson et al. 2003). This is seen as a deliberate means of counteracting opposition by



embracing dissent (Paterson et al. 2003) and has, at its heart, the necessity to secure long-term legitimacy. The globalisation of capitalism is a polarising process, creating wealth in some regions and poverty, unemployment, marginalisation and exclusion in others (Sanderson, 2000; Gray and Lawrence, 2001; Bauman, 2004). And, under policies of neoliberal marketisation, the state is no longer willing or able to place a safety net under those disadvantaged by change (Geddes, 2003).

## **What Might be Going on Here?**

Globalisation represents a reordering of the world, with market rule as the dominant discourse (Peine and McMichael, forthcoming). Neoliberalism is generating a series of economic rationalist policy settings that are fostering free-markets, global flows of finance, and socio-economic integration. If the 1940s General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade embraced the ideal of national sovereignty, then the new century's World Trade Organisation can be viewed as a global governing entity prioritising the needs of the corporation over the community (Peine and McMichael, forthcoming). Although mediated by the nation state, regional locales are interacting with global firms in a manner that supports those advantaged by access to information technology, skilled labour and so forth. But, at the same time that global flows of capital, products, technologies and knowledge are accelerating, so are concerns about the sustainability of those activities. The so-called 'greening' of western society has, as one of its prominent features, the growing demand by citizens for environmental security (see Brand, 1997). This is becoming something that the state is struggling to achieve through conventional regulatory mechanisms. For this reason, the shift from top down 'government' to new forms of governing represent not the demise of state authority but a form of re-regulation which attempts to resolve some of the contradictions inherent in capitalist expansion and its consequent impacts upon the ecosystem. A governance model accepts that subsystems – like bioregions – are the site for networking and other arrangements that might allow global processes to be 'managed' in a manner that if not ultimately protecting the environment, at least provides new options for longer term environmental security. The regions are an experiment in the promotion, and governing, of sustainability.

The work of Nicholas Rose (1996) is useful to consider here. He has argued that statist ideologies based on notions of 'society' are being replaced by those of 'community' with the subsequent growth of a new territory of administration being the locale (neighbourhood group, community – for the purposes of argument here, the region), necessitating a re-conceptualisation of the relationship between the state, the market and civil society. Elected governments, in his view, identify and promote the interaction between various stakeholders, rather than impose top down decisions. Neoliberalism appears to have endorsed and fostered the self regulation of individuals and communities which, at the regional level, equates to the acceptance of programs, techniques and procedures that support market rule, productivism and global competition (Higgins, 2002; Herbert-Cheshire, 2003) while, at the same time, seeking to promote sustainable development. The partnership approach that is part of contemporary governance is infused with ideals of community and empowerment. Under advanced liberal rule, the conduct of individuals and communities is shaped by notions of entrepreneurialism and capacity building with those electing to oppose these discourses and policy settings marginalised and, indeed, blamed for their own demise if they and their communities fail to thrive (see Higgins, 2002; Herbert-Cheshire, 2003: 280). State agencies are viewed as exerting 'action at a distance', with self-assessment and self-regulation replacing state coercion through regulatory mechanisms.

As Karkkainen (2003: 220) reports, decision-making about environmental matters is moving to a model of collaborative problem solving at 'multiple, nested spatial scales'. He considers 'the driving ambition of ecosystem management is to create new human institutions matched to the scales of crucial ecological processes' (Karkkainen, 2003: 221). The result is the emergence of hybrid institutions featuring collaborative arrangements between a host of government, business and community entities creating a 'complex web of institutional reconfigurations' in which the state continues to play an important role in the provision of resources. This is broadly consistent with Fung and Wright's (2003) assessment of what they term 'empowered participatory governance' which is typified by: the devolution of decision-making powers to empowered local entities; linkages of accountability to superordinate bodies; and, transformations in current forms of representative government.

Fung and Wright (2003) argue that this new model is not that of the New Left where the devolution of power would manifest itself in autonomous decentralisation (or even regional government). Rather it is viewed as coordinated decentralisation where partnership arrangements allow for multi-level power re-alignments. Importantly, Fung and Wright implicitly believe that empowered participatory democracy has a more radical potential than the earlier revolutionary notions of 'capturing the state'. Why? Because local citizens, in new decision-making networks where there is some semblance of equality of power, have the capacity to make changes and challenge the structures of bureaucracy that were, in the past, barriers to social change. And they do so with the 'blessing' of the state which is eager to see the mobilization of popular participation and the resolution of complex local problems through the process of reasoned deliberation (Fung and Wright, 2003: 24).

While accepting that there might be 'damning flaws' in their model, Fung and Wright (2003: 29-38) consider that empowered participatory democracy should be readily embraced as an alternative to the failures of earlier statist policies that relied upon mechanisms of representative governance and bureaucracy to deliver fair and equitable solutions to regional problems. While we might question the ability of rural citizens to become engaged, reflexive, participants in the new arrangements from a position of social disadvantage (see Gray and Lawrence, 2001; Cheshire and Lawrence, 2004) - one in which many in rural and regional areas experience social isolation, exclusion and deprivation and where environmental problems remain largely unsolved - it is nevertheless important to note that many regional people have embraced this change as representing a genuine attempt to give them a voice and to achieve action in regional development matters (AFFA, 1999).

## **The Tensions and Contradictions of Devolved Governance**

Not surprisingly, many writers who have examined the emergence of new forms of governance have not been wholly convinced of their capacity to deliver outcomes that challenge current trajectories or that provide for a sustainable future. I have identified five major concerns:

### ***Regional bodies challenge the power of the entities that have created them, yet they rely upon that central power for their existence***

While it is claimed that the movement from government to governance is something innovative, dynamic and empowering for citizens, the regional bodies have tended to exist alongside

existing tiers of government, rather than replace them. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that for many people in regional decision-making bodies the experience in dealing with existing state and other bureaucracies is frustrating and, indeed, disempowering and that they are beginning to challenge the legitimacy of the very state entities that approved of their formation. The claim is often made that there is an institutional incapacity in the old structures of representative government that must be overcome for progress to be made at the regional level. Will these new bodies wrest power from the 'centre'? If not, will they be content to remain as the poor cousins of one or more existing level of government?

Local level coalitions and partnerships act upon and transform institutional structures of government (Goodwin, 1998). What if this is a challenge to existing power structures and arrangements? Because the new forms of governance move within and between current forms of authority, their functions can be readily questioned. And, because they are dependent upon central funding, they can disappear with a withdrawal of that funding (Westholm et al. 1999). As Shortall and Shucksmith (1998) remind us, if funding is a main stimulus for the creation of partnerships, it is quite likely that those partnerships will collapse if and when funding is withdrawn. Furthermore, 'ephemeral' arrangements neither inspire commitment from stakeholders, nor give us hope that longer-term options will be either discussed or pursued by partnerships. There is an assumption that partnerships will be a better (that is more efficient, inclusive and transparent) way of delivering outcomes at the local level. However, as Geddes (2003: 15) has argued:

Most partnerships are only weakly constituted in organisational terms, and the great majority have only very limited dedicated staff and financial resources. It is asking a great deal for such weak local organisations to achieve the kind of joined up delivery that government itself finds very difficult.

### ***Rather than being inclusive, regional bodies can exclude key stakeholders***

There are often elaborate attempts made in the regions to ensure that all key stakeholders are represented on the new bodies. There are some problems here. First, groups have differential power and resources with some having the capacity to lobby within groups, and - behind the scenes - to promote their positions on particular issues. In Australia, many of the stakeholders on catchment management committees are farmers, graziers, local government officials and small business owners with the financial wherewithal to travel long distances and stay - often for several days - at distant venues within the catchments. Younger people, and Indigenous Australians are usually notable by their absence. Second, even if representation were equitable at the local level, it could readily be argued that some of the main stakeholders in sustainable development are those outside the regions - those whose livelihoods are strongly affected by those living in, and making decisions about, the catchment. When rounds of priority setting occur in the formulation of catchment management or regional development plans where is the voice of the city environmentalist, the overseas consumer or, as our Actor Network colleagues would remind us, where is the voice of nature? Indeed, some have criticised the current construction of sustainability for its anthropocentric bias - for interpreting the environment as primarily a resource for human use, rather than being valued for its own integrity (Doyle, 1998).

Partnerships between a multiplicity of actors increasingly allow individuals and groups from business and community sectors to take what are, in essence, political decisions in regard to policy and funding. Although it is believed that transparency and visibility of decision-making

processes might help to overcome this problem, it nevertheless remains that local elites – often politically savvy and financially advantaged - can increase their power while at the same time denying it to already marginalised and excluded groups in the community (Westholm, 1999: 20).

***The new arrangements for sustainable development may embrace and foster productivism rather than replace it***

Citizen power can make local people feel good, without really addressing the wider system of productivism and its unsustainable trajectory. On many regional bodies charged with sustainable development sit primary producers whose *modus operandi* is to harness the latest products of science and agribusiness to increase productivity. The need for a radical reassessment and re-alignment of production regimes is literally off the agenda. Indeed, in the Australian context, producers have – in the face of new knowledge about environmental degradation - been found to deny the evidence; contest the evidence; or, even where they accept the evidence, either blame governments, or maintain that they do not have the financial wherewithal to alter their current production regimes (see Lawrence, Richards and Herbert-Cheshire, 2003). Some are, of course, adopting 'best management' and other restorative practices (Lockie, 2001). The question is: will incremental change, rather than radical change, be enough to bring about sustainability? There is evidence, worldwide, that the problem will get worse before it gets better, with some calling for the emergence of an entirely new global system of production and distribution as the only means of achieving sustainability (see Davies, 2004).

Part of the problem is that when left to orthodox economists, the problems of environmental degradation and regional socio-economic degeneration are conceived of as market failures. All that is apparently needed is better mechanisms to 'cost' environmental problems, and to allow better market access so that there will be increased trade in environmental goods, and – in relation to regional development – the removal of labour market restraints so that wages become cheaper and business is attracted into the regions (see discussion in Gray and Lawrence, 2001). I would argue that justifications for the continuation of neoliberal policy settings as the basis for sustainable development empty the latter of any real transformative potential.

In Europe's so-called 'lagging regions' there is very strong pressure for economic development over environmental concerns (Berger, 2003). While this might seem reasonable (a 'jobs first' strategy) it nevertheless reinforces the claim that in the more marginal regions there is a preoccupation with economic growth, to the detriment of any 'triple bottom line' approach. Significantly, in an era of globalisation, local production sites are integrated into global markets by supranational agribusiness firms, often deliberately by-passing the legislative mechanisms established by the nation state and aimed at protecting the environment (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton, 1999). Will the regions compromise environmental security for the short-term economic benefits of investment? Will regional governance arrangements secure the best future for the regions? In Australia, for example, the emerging framework of regional governance has emphasised competition over cooperation – with 'bidding wars' occurring as regional bodies seek to capture as much funding as possible, and within limited federal and State budgets. The 'beggar thy neighbour' approach that has seen the States out manoeuvring each other for private and public funding is being imposed at the regional level, raising the spectre of further unevenness of development as regional options are pursued (Stilwell, 2000).

### ***The enthusiasm for participation is likely be quelled by the reality of accountability***

We don't need Max Weber to remind us that voluntary structures can readily transmogrify into bureaucracies and that one of the reasons for this is the perceived need for accountability. Overlapping layers of participative regional governance in the context of the structures of representative government are confusing enough. When multilayered levels of federal and state agency responsibility and business interactions are also introduced, the result can be total incomprehensibility. And, on top of this, when the public funding is injected into the equation, there are often grave fears that the funds will be either misspent - or will disappear without trace.

In some regions there are literally hundreds of separate entities charged with delivering programs, often working across a number of regional and subregional boundaries, and having no immediate connection with each other. Part of the problem has to do with the so-called 'stove piping' of government activity – a Department of Natural Resources, a Department of Agriculture, a separate Agency for Environmental Protection, another Department of Regional Development, and so forth – where, rather than serving the interests of the community via regional bodies, they compete for funding and 'status' within government. The regional bodies often find it difficult to manoeuvre their way through thickets of legislation, forests of paperwork and the jungles of responsibility. But another part of the problem is that public monies are being delivered to non-democratically elected regional entities. As Gerry Stoker (1998) has reminded us, the emergence of self-governing networks creates the problem of accountability. It is one that is supposedly 'fixed' by central agencies creating a complex set of rules for the procurement and expenditure of funds. However, the outcome is that the regional organisations begin to behave more like regional business organisations or local governments, robbing the organisation of its fluid and dynamic character and ultimately containing expenditures to those activities approved by central bureaucracies. Here we experience what Eshuis and van Woerkum (2003: 393) refer to as the 'vicious circle of bureaucratic monitoring and distrust'. The irony here is that the move to more participative forms of decision-making activity was motivated, in the first place, by the need to escape the more rigid, technical forms of planning that were seen to be the products of aloof, city-based, government departments (see Lawrence, 2001)!

It has been observed (see Cowell and Martin, 2003) that the desire for much stronger integration through 'joined up' governance has led to ever-increasing controls by central administrations as they scrutinize the priorities and performance of local and regional agencies. This has been the experience in Australia (Lawrence, 2003) and, it appears, in the US, UK, New Zealand, Canada and many EU states (such as Sweden and the Netherlands)(see Geddes, 2003). In other words, centralised managerialism can readily accommodate a rhetoric of local involvement and capacity building – making something of a mockery of community empowerment. Central power can and does undermine local initiative at the same time as it renders harmless any attempts to develop alternative policy at the local level (Geddes, 2003). If stakeholders believe that a decision-making process is flawed – especially if they don't trust in their ability to have the outcomes of participative decision-making endorsed and 'delivered' - they will be reluctant to participate further and often withdraw their support (Eshuis and van Woerkum, 2003). They will – ultimately - be disempowered.

It is one thing to accept that the appropriate governing structures for sustainable development will be 'multilevel' and 'multistakeholder' (European Communities, 2003) but quite another to conclude that such structures, or what results from deliberations within those structures, might

have widespread legitimacy. According to Bulkeley et al. (2003) although the EU supports 'bottom up' governance to enable people at the grassroots level to participate in decision making (and to promote transparency, inclusivity and accountability), the ideal of participative democracy is compromised by 'patterns of power and legacies of past relationships that can obscure processes and complicate decision making' (Bulkeley et al. 2003: 250). In fact, multilevel governance entities can sidestep the political and institutional structures of the nation state and bring 'global' policies to bear on their local actions (Bulkeley, 2003: 251). This may further global governance but fail to do so in ways that would enhance sustainable development – particularly when the global agenda is one of extending the influence of free trade and corporate expansionism (Stiglitz, 2003; McMichael, 2004). We have to ask: will 'bottom up' governance ultimately be compromised by a lack of democratic legitimacy? (Bulkeley et al. 2003).

Finally, partnerships often rely upon a slow accumulation of social trust: this tends to reduce the ability of groups to undertake action in short time periods and, indeed, when decisions are made they tend to be about incremental, not radical, change (Westholm, 1999: 21).

***Rural people are expected to act to save the planet, but their ability to do so is proscribed by their liminality***

'Progress' in capitalist agriculture is usually typified by the following: under demands of competition: farm numbers decline; farm size increases; labour is replaced by technology; off-farm inputs (machinery, agri-chemicals, fertilizers and capital) are purchased in ever larger volumes; and, farm output burgeons (Stirling, 2001; Lawrence et al. forthcoming). Farm output enters the marketplace where – in the context of slowly growing demand – it fails to provide the level of profit needed to sustain the economic base of farming, placing pressure on farmers to leave the land, increase farm size, purchase more inputs – and so forth. It is not without good reason that this has been termed the 'treadmill of production' (Schnaiberg, 1980). It is a treadmill that has – as one of many unintended consequences – environmental degradation.

Given that much of the degradation of natural resources is a bi-product of productivist agriculture, it would therefore seem appropriate that rural producers are progressively enrolled in schemes to alter their on-farm activities. What must be recognised, however, is that a large proportion of farmers – particularly so-called 'family farmers' - are economically marginalised, failing to obtain sufficient income from agricultural endeavours to maintain their livelihoods (Barr and Cary, 2000; Almas and Lawrence, 2003). Many have to pursue off-farm work options to maintain a cash flow. Should we expect that they would have the funds or time to devote to correcting environmental degradation, despite the various incentives offered by the state?

Apart from the farmers, many of those living in rural communities have been progressively disempowered and detraditionalised under neo-liberal policies that remove the social services and infrastructural platforms that might enhance community action (see Gray and Lawrence, 2001). And, as people leave farming and rural regions, the extent of social participation and level of trust and scale of community activity are all curtailed and threatened (Pretty, 2002). 'Self help' and partnership initiatives look to be going only part-the-way to addressing the mistakes of the past and of the converting natural resource managers to a new sustainable development trajectory.

It is recognised that globalisation and the accompanying restructuring of the state have produced major regional disparities (Gleeson, 2003). As Fung and Wright (2003: 33) acknowledge 'empowered participation may demand unrealistically high levels of popular commitment, especially in contemporary climates of civic and popular disengagement'.

There is also the very interesting notion that if 'family farm' producers have limited ability to change, that if supermarkets are becoming more demanding of the products that they put on their shelves, and that if the majority of agricultural production is really being provided by a very small minority of producers, that it might be that the future for a more sustainable agriculture lies in the closer ties of supermarkets to producers, and under the auspices of informal global regulatory bodies such as EUREP (Campbell, personal correspondence, 2004). It is not fanciful to suggest that the corporate food sector might see market advantage in sourcing foods and fibres from farms adhering to 'clean and green' guidelines, banning genetically-modified organisms from the products they place on their shelves, and imposing very strict sustainability-related standards on their suppliers. Would this not lead to the intriguing conclusion that the faster the smaller producers leave agriculture - and have the remainder linked to a progressive supermarket-based system that took seriously voluntary regulation - the more likely we are to achieve sustainability? (see Burch, Lyons and Lawrence, 2001; Burch and Lawrence, 2004).

## **How, Then, are we to Govern Sustainability?**

The shift from government to governance (Berger, 2003) is that of a move from a linear, top-down, state-directed system of decision-making to one of non-hierarchical arrangements involving a complex network of both state and non-state players (see Bulkeley et al. 2003: 237). What appears to be occurring is that some of the functions of the state are shifting 'upwards' to transnational institutions and organisations, 'downwards' to the regions, and 'outward' to a host of non-state actors (see Bulkeley et al. 2003, following Pierre and Peters, 2000) as part of the hollowing out of the nation state (but see, for an alternative view, Deas and Ward, 2000). Yet, this too gives the impression of a hierarchy of governance when what appears to have emerged is decision-making within 'overlapping and interconnected spheres of authority' (Bulkeley et al. 2003: 239). Governance in the EU, for example, is no longer conceived of as the bargaining and negotiating between nation states but, rather, as the outcome of fluid interactions between multiple spheres (supranational institutions, nation states, transnational networks, subnational governments, place-based partnerships and civil society) (Bulkeley et al. 2003). Europe's Transnational Municipal Networks, for example, not only help in the articulation between various tiers of government but also seek – in their own right – to govern the environment. They do so by disseminating knowledge, lobbying governments, and implementing EU policies (Bulkeley et al. 2003). The US's Habitat Conservation Planning and Australia's catchment management strategies are emblematic of the shift from command-type and fragmented governance to that of collaborative, integrated, regional ecosystem arrangements where recognition is given of the complexity of environmental issues and the need to cross traditional political and administrative boundaries in an effort to address those issues (Karkkainen, 2003; Everingham, Cheshire and Lawrence, 2003).

In Australia, my colleagues and I have identified three periods of regional governance since the Second World War. The first was an old-style regionalism that existed until the 1980s. This was associated with decentralisation, exogenous development, the industrialisation of agriculture, and welfarist and protectionist policies. A second phase – a form of 'new localism' - arose in the mid-1980s and was typified by an emphasis on individual and community empowerment and

action, endogenous development, and small government – all endorsed and fostered by neoliberalism. What we believe we are seeing today is something quite different. It is the emergence of the bioregion as the basic delineation for local decision-making, the development of state/community partnerships, the flexible coordination of government activities, some alteration to (rather than a complete escape from) productivist agriculture, and strategic state investment in regionally-based natural resource management (Everingham et al. 2003). This could be considered a variant of the ‘new regionalism’ that has been identified in Europe (see commentary by Rainnie, 2002), although we believe it is really closer to what Marsden (2003: 4) considers to be a ‘rural development dynamic’ that highlights the re-embedding of food supply chains, a focus on rural livelihoods, an agro-ecological approach to farm management, and rural sustainability as the goal of development. It is, what is termed in Australia ‘sustainable regional development’ – a community/government partnership approach that goes beyond the strict neoliberalist-inspired self-help models of the 1990s. While it falls short of a radical sustainability that would be marked by bioregionalism and a shift of power (rather than simply responsibility) to new institutions (see Gray and Lawrence, 2001: 153), it represents a positive move to understand the complexity and fragility of ecosystems and to stress the necessity of integrated and multilevel strategies. It appears to be much more ambitious, for example, than the EU’s Eco-management and Audit Scheme that is concerned primarily with governance of the environment (see Heinelt and Smith, 2003). Importantly, sustainable regional development anticipates that the new partnership arrangements must be supported by a long-term commitment by governments and by considerable public funding (Lawrence, 2003).

The question could still be raised, however, of the desirability of moving from known systems of government to untested systems of governance based upon the deliberations of unelected representatives. As Everingham et al. (2003: 11) have argued, the broadening of the mandate and accountability for such institutions:

- allows the long-term perspective necessary for environmental sustainability, thereby overcoming the short-term planning timeframe linked to three or four year election cycles
- provides an opportunity to restore trust between citizens and government departments....with a move beyond rigid one-way forms of public consultation to more diverse, flexible and open systems of engagement that involve a broad spectrum of the regional population and encourage deliberative and discursive participation....
- gives legitimacy to local knowledge and the sharing of values, with local people not only having a voice in regional planning, but also helping to shape the process of change.

Social networks are the foundations of society and provide the basis for more formal arrangements of government (Taylor, 2004). As such, they are to be nurtured and promoted to harness social capital and to foster social inclusion (Crow, 2004).

Notwithstanding the potential for a regional renaissance based on ‘triple bottom line’ approaches, we should nevertheless recall John Lovering’s (2001: 350) assessment of the present regional agenda:

Portrayals of (regionalism) or devolution as if they represent the triumphant culmination of struggles to empower distinctive regional identities are at best romantic readings....(that) obscure the fact that regionalism can also be a key component of a



strategy of state restructuring aimed at realizing a broadly neo-liberal model of globalization.

To sum up the earlier discussions, there are several pointers to success in sustainable regional development:

- acknowledgement that regional development is about sustainable development and that all plans for development must treat the economy, society and environment on an equal footing
- an increased devolution of power (not just responsibility) to regional entities, with a real recognition of the potential of these groups to make a difference in terms of long-term natural resource management and social justice
- emergence of a structure of governance that ensures that institutional arrangements are conducive to regional decision-making. Government agencies must come behind community initiatives to provide technical support for sustainable development: this will mean a reorganisation of government activities so that holistic approaches are adopted over single departmental priorities
- commitment of sufficient financial and other resources to regional groupings to ensure that on-ground activities are undertaken, monitored and improved
- acceptance of a long-term time-line to ensure that the regional arrangements are accepted as legitimate and can survive the election timeframes of politics.

## **Conclusion**

To paraphrase and update Karl Marx, sociologists have been content to interpret the world when the point, however, is to ensure its sustainability. What sociological insights can we bring to bear on this?

In this talk I have raised a series of questions about the regional delivery for sustainable development and have argued that while there is evidence of success, this is not to say that it is challenging the framework of current (unsustainable) production, or that it is not a contradictory process at the local level.

What will happen with the regional experiment in sustainability? It has been initiated at least in part because of the perceived lack of progress being made in fighting environmental degradation, the assumption that if local people 'own' problems they will be more willing to invest time and effort in their solution, and recognition that long term environmental progress should not be tied to three or four year cycles of parliament (in which the environment could be used each time as a political football).

Along with recognition of the failure of the structures and processes associated with representative government to deal with the complexities of sustainability, the five discernable characteristics of regional governance as it relates to sustainable development are:

- a so-called 'bottom up' approach to decision-making, with local communities being encouraged to take ownership of development and natural resource management problems

- the devolution of responsibility to the regional level. As an element of this, the desire to 'empower' citizens both to understand the issues and to act collectively to overcome them – that is, to raise their capacity to act for themselves
- a more responsive bureaucratic response to community plans and needs – particularly 'whole of government' approaches and an alteration to the organisational culture of 'stove piped' government agencies. The state becomes an 'enabler'
- creation of a community-initiated action plan, with clear goals and timelines
- a series of (often complex) measures for accountability in the expenditure of funds, and in the monitoring and evaluation of sustainability applications (Westholm et al. 1999; Cavaye, 2004).

The real question is: can we trust – and should we endorse – regional partnerships to deliver sustainable development? We know that previous arrangements based upon top-down legislative sanctions have largely failed. We know that sustainability is a long-term goal that must live beyond both parliamentary terms and the lives of the current generation of people in existing communities. We also know that the current arrangements are an experiment: they are hybrid, fragile, uncertain, and contingent.

So, why might we want to endorse the emergence of governance structures to foster something called 'sustainable regional development'? Without wanting to be too prescriptive, the answer I will give is pragmatic and eclectic. There is little else that – at this time – appears to provide a genuine option for the future. Should we look to the World Trade Organisation and other supranational governance bodies for leadership in sustainable development? The answer would seem to be 'no'. As Howard Newby (1996: 214) reminded us last decade, most global agencies seeking to govern resources lack legitimacy and respond 'slowly and imperfectly' to the demands of local people. Might, then, we trust the global corporate sector's embracing of 'self regulation' as the key to sustainability? In some instances, yes, but certainly no in general. There are good reasons, then, to look to support the regional 'experiment' in sustainable development. It is community based, government supported and has – at its core – a framework that represents the interests of community/government partners in triple bottom line action. Why, though, should we place any faith in collaborative arrangements to deliver sustainable outcomes?

We should perhaps recall the words of Christopher Lasch (1995: 8) in his book *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* when he argued:

Self-governing communities, not individuals, are the basic units of democratic life...(Their demise)...calls the future of democracy into question.

In a world of individualisation, detraditionalisation, economic polarisation and environmental degradation, it would seem that rural sociologists can play an important role in understanding the contours of current regional development and its potential for strengthening democracy. This does not mean a blanket endorsement of regional policy but, rather, the careful evaluation of structures and processes of governance, an understanding of the forces that foster unsustainable practices, and an appreciation of the social, economic and institutional mechanisms that might move rural regions further along the path toward sustainable development.

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