Governance, institutional capacity and partnerships in local economic development: theoretical issues and empirical evidence from the Humber Sub-region

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Recent research on local and regional economic development has focused upon transformations in local governance and institutional capacity. It has been argued that local authorities have ceded power to other actors and institutions involved in economic development and regeneration, and that the success of local and regional economic development is closely related to the strength of ‘institutional capacity’ within an area. In this paper, we examine these claims with reference to the operation of EU Structural Funds in the Humber Sub-region of the UK. Previous research on local governance and institutional capacity has had a limited empirical focus, drawing conclusions from studies of either economically ‘successful’ regions or regions undergoing regulatory and institutional transformation and precluding analysis of the nature and conditions of local governance and institutional capacity in less developed regions. Our case study evidence not only suggests that arguments about the declining influence of the local state are overdrawn, but also indicates a need for more nuanced accounts of the role of institutional capacity in regional development.

key words  Humber  governance  institutional capacity  European Union  local government  Structural Funds

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Introduction

The literature on local economic and regional development has expanded significantly within the last decade. Authors have suggested that the region is now the pre-eminent site for economic development activities (Storper 1997), and that successful local and regional economic development is linked to the presence of ‘institutional capacity’ or ‘institutional thickness’ within a region. Much of the empirical focus of writing on the ‘new regionalism’ has been upon institutional frameworks established in ‘successful’ regions such as the Third Italy or Silicon Valley in California (Scott 1988; Saxenian 1994; cf Lovering 1995), although more recently attention has turned to the nature of governance and institutional change in formerly ‘successful’ regions including...
those undergoing a crisis of social regulation (Peck and Tickell 1995; Jonas 1996). An underlying assumption of much of this kind of analysis is that a major problem for ‘lagging’ regions is that they either lack the type of institutional capacity present in more ‘successful’ areas or, if they do exhibit some degree of institutional thickness, the local institutional milieu is conflict-ridden and dysfunctional to the realisation of a hegemonic growth model (Jonas 1996; cf Jessop 1990). By implication, there is a continued role for public policy to help create the types of capacities that are perceived to be more conducive to regional development: as Martin (2000a, 24), has argued, ‘the notion of “institutional thickness” has rapidly moved from being an analytical concept to a prescriptive one’. In the European regional policy context, with which we are concerned in this paper, there is an administrative bias towards developing partnerships and capacities observed to have ‘worked’ in the more successful EU regions.

Writing on local economic development has ranged across themes such as relations between the central and local state, the growth of the ‘entrepreneurial city’, and notions of ‘learning’ regions (MacLeod and Goodwin 1999b). These processes have been interpreted from various theoretical perspectives, including urban regime theory, growth coalitions, regulation theory and neo-Gramscian state theory. In the UK there has been a particular concern with shifting styles and processes of local government. The arguments here have been that many local government functions and responsibilities have been substantially reduced over the past decade, with these functions either transferred to quangos established by central government or to the private sector. Local authorities are said to have become more ‘entrepreneurial’, engaging in new partnerships with the private and community/voluntary sectors so as to leverage public resources and inward investment (Cochrane 1999). In the process, local government has been reduced to simply one actor amongst many, albeit that it retains an important role through the proliferation of ‘partnership’ working.¹ Such research recently has drawn upon North American urban regime theory (Stoker and Mossberger 1994), but in the process has highlighted regime theory’s restrictive localistic empirical focus. In particular, it overemphasizes urban-area partnerships and underestimates the role of the wider state-administrative apparatus (Lauria 1997; Jonas 1996). In the case of the UK, it is particularly important to conceptualize the ‘Europeanization’ of local governance (Harding 1997). Incentives for partnership formation in both rural and urban areas are built into the allocation of monies from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). That is, ‘[i]f partnership now matters, then, it is because it has been made to matter’ (Jessop, Peck and Tickell 1999, 155).

In this paper, we draw upon these substantive areas of research to examine the administration of European Structural Funds within the Humber Sub-Region in the UK. This ‘mixed’ urban-rural area has been ranked amongst the 35 ‘poorest metropolitan regions’ in the European Union (McCarthy 2000, 200) and since the 1990s qualified for Objective 2 status under the European Structural Funds. Precisely because of the emphasis placed upon partnership activity under the EU regional funding regime, the Humber area provides a useful opportunity to examine conditions surrounding the development of governance change and institutional capacity in a region characterized by poor economic performance, high levels of social deprivation and relatively limited governance capacities in relation both to other regions in Britain and to the rest of Europe. In so doing, we reflect upon Jessop’s (1997) contention that rather than local capacities to act being enhanced or downgraded, state capacity is being reorganised both territorially and functionally.

In framing our study in this way, we recognize the considerable blurring between – and indeed frequent conflation of – notions of ‘the local’ and ‘the regional’ both in theory and in practice. Not only is local governance sometimes used as a theoretical referent to economic development at broader geographical scales but also the Humber Sub-region itself is a particularly ‘messy’ entity. Rather than a coherent territorial ensemble of production structures (Storper 1997), the Sub-region is in practice a disparate mix of industries, towns, cities and rural areas. The present Sub-regional boundaries are relatively recent ones, and not all of the Sub-region has been eligible to receive European funding. However we suggest that the Humber case has much to say to assertions about governance and institutional capacity – discussions which not only have been based upon limited empirical evidence, but also have tended to focus upon ‘successful’ or ‘transitional’ rather than ‘less
developed’ regions, and regions with a dominant metropolitan centre as opposed to areas containing an urban-rural mix. Mindful of recent debates in human geography about the relationship between ‘policy’ and ‘research’ (see Peck 1999; Martin 2001b; also Pollard et al 2000; Banks and MacKian 2000), some comments concerning the study’s context are warranted. The paper draws upon research undertaken as part of a review of the implementation of the Single Programming Document (SPD) of 1994–96 for the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber (GOYH) and for the European Commission. Our brief was to examine the operation of the Objective 2 1994–96 SPD in relation to two issues. We were invited to consider whether the SPD had achieved particular outputs expected from the Structural Funds (for example, jobs created and built infrastructure completed); and to review the development, capacity and practice of partnerships in the Sub-region. The second part of this research – and that upon which the paper is based – was qualitative in nature and utilized open-ended interviews. Whilst our research design was framed by the policy-making process, discussions with interviewees did seek to interrogate wider debates surrounding governance and institutional capacity.

The paper has the following structure. We first reflect further upon debates arising from transitional theories of local governance and upon discussions of institutional capacity and the ‘new regionalism’. We then emphasize the extent to which the aims of developing institutional capacity and partnerships form a key part of EU regional policy objectives. The central sections of the paper outline the socio-economic context of the Humber Sub-region and detail the operation of the partnership process in the 1994–96 SPD. Our conclusions consider the implications of the Humber case study both for future research on governance and institutional capacity and for the future economic development of the Sub-region.

Reorganizing the state: local governance and institutional capacity

Jessop’s (1997) work on the reorganization of the state provides a helpful starting point from which to examine the Humber case study and as a frame of reference to interpret the processes at work (MacLeod and Jones 1999). State reorganization involves three processes. First, the denationalization of the state suggests that far from there being a simple scalar process of movement of state power downwards, there have also been moves upwards and sideways. While local and regional scales have gained an enhanced governance role, this has not necessarily meant a concomitant loss of power by the nation state. This process of ‘hollowing out’ of state activity is only one part of other processes of restructuring – the destatization of the political system and the internationalization of policy regimes also have key importance for local and regional governance. The former refers to the shift from government to governance with a relative decline in the direct management and sponsorship of social and economic projects by the state (MacLeod and Goodwin 1999a; see also Painter and Goodwin 1995). The latter refers to the growing importance of international contexts and policy arenas for state actors. Overall, Jessop (1997) posits a shift from a focus upon simply domestic performance of the economy to a concern with its competitiveness internationally.

Much UK research has emphasized the destatization aspect of Jessop’s work, with a focus on a declining role for local authorities as a result of qualitative increases in the involvement of other actors. A number of authors explicitly have highlighted a shift from local government to local governance (Goodwin and Painter 1996; cf Cochrane 1993). It is argued that under successive Conservative governments, an increasing proportion of powers accrued to the central state, albeit that programmes and policies were still delivered locally (Stewart and Stoker 1989; Pickvance and Preteceille 1991). At the same time, a range of local authority functions have been contracted out to the private sector or given over to non-elected quangos. Local authorities now appear to be one player amongst many, having become ‘strategic enablers’ rather than direct deliverers of policy (Raco 1999b).

One important change to UK local governance structures has been the increasing prominence of ‘partnership’ working, in which private sector organizations, voluntary groups, community groups and other public institutions such as universities and Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) have begun to work alongside local authorities in local economic development and regeneration schemes (Miller 1999). For theorists of governance, the emergence of partnerships prompted a shift in conceptual approaches. There
has been considerable recent interest in urban regime theory, which in the North American context examined local (urban) governing coalitions spanning the divisions between the local state, the local economy and local civil society (Stone 1987; Cox 1997; Lauria 1999; Brown 1999; on the UK context see e.g. Bassett 1999; Stoker 1995; Ward 1996; 1997).

Although most discussants of urban regime theory focus upon actors internal to a regime, much of the denationalization of the state in the UK (Jessop 1997) has been orchestrated at a national level. Partnership working formally entered into local authority discourses in 1991 when partnerships became a requirement of City Challenge bids, and continued through their inclusion within Single Regeneration Budget ground rules from 1994 (Coulson 1997). Exactly what the term means is less clear: ‘[central] government has been unwilling to spell out exactly what partnership means, other than expressing hopes that greater co-ordination and synergy will focus minds and maximize resources’ (Atkinson 1999, 63). We can see the use of partnership discourses in regeneration policy as part of central localism (Peck 1998) – that is, where central government determines the ‘rules of the game’ for local actors, albeit that these may in turn be reinterpreted in different local contexts. Particularly where it has been seen to involve the rise of non-elected quangos, partnership working has been criticized as anti-democratic, with business élites controlling large sums of public money in the absence of public and democratic accountability (Tickell and Peck 1996).²

Work on the ‘new regionalism’ has emphasized the region as the appropriate scale for developing economic capacity at a time when national capacity to do so appears to be diminishing (see Jones and MacLeod 1999 for a review). In a related vein, authors also have stressed the processes by which ‘institutional thickness’ develops in regions. MacLeod and Goodwin (1999a, 704) argue, for example, that

secur[ing] local economic success is not solely determined by a narrow set of economic factors and/or financial inducements. Instead, the capacity to territorially ‘embed’ global processes in place is now increasingly conditional upon a plethora of social, cultural and institutional forms and supports (emphasis in original).

‘Institutional thickness’ is facilitated – at least in part – by an active institutional presence of development agencies, trade associations, and/or voluntary agencies, although writers have tended to focus upon the process of institutionalization rather than identifying concrete institutions and capacities and tensions therein (see also Martin 2001b).

Further, there has been some scepticism about the extent to which the presence or absence of ‘institutional thickness’ can explain uneven development (Amin and Thrift 1994). The literature often has tended to emphasize the quantity of intra-regional institutions and the frequency of transactions rather than the quality of the institutions and their inter-relationships. For example, an economic growth sector might well have strong institutional presence in a region but at the same time may not engage in partnerships or effect regional political change, processes which may depend on the effectiveness of capacities and partnerships in other sectors (Jonas 1996). Given the predominant focus upon ‘successful’ regions, it is far from clear whether or not institutional thickness itself stimulates growth, and whether or not a strong regional economy in fact creates institutional thickness. Additionally, ‘weak’ regional economies may nevertheless have well-developed institutional capacities. There has been a tendency to separate analytically the issue of institutional capacity from that of regional economic performance, a tendency that in the case of urban regime theory is exemplified by a relatively narrow focus upon local ‘governing coalitions’ rather than conceptualizing the relationship between these institutions and urban or regional economic development.

In order to move beyond such a theoretical impasse, regulationist approaches to local governance have begun to focus upon formerly ‘successful’ economic regions undergoing profound institutional changes. By looking at such regions, it is possible to postulate the presence (or absence) of causal relationships between economic change, state policy shifts, and local institutional capacities (Jessop 1995; 1997; Jonas 1997). Investigations of local and regional partnerships and their emergent strategies have drawn a theoretical distinction between ‘necessity’ and ‘contingency’ insofar as the structural context (regulatory transition) appears to have facilitated certain types of partnerships and ‘strategic actions’ but precluded others (cf Jessop 1997). A related question is the extent to which regulatory transition has created an
institutional space for strategic action and partnership working at certain spatial scales whilst diminishing opportunities at others.

Despite such theoretical problematics, there is a growing view that economic performance is directly related to institutional capacity in particular places (Evans and Harding 1997). It has been argued that ‘institutions provide the basis for localised social and economic networks and contacts and that strong institutional relations may act as a prelude to regional economic success’ (Raco 1999a, 951). From a policy perspective this has frequently been taken to mean that institutional capacities are poorly developed in ‘lagging’ regions and that public policy should attempt to replicate – or at least facilitate – the forms of capacity found in ‘successful’ regions (Garmise and Rees 1997).3

Policy initiatives may take the form of establishing social and political institutions that facilitate networking and co-operative arrangements between local firms (Raco 1999a). Such initiatives have developed notwithstanding criticism that institutional capacities do not exist in isolation from broader economic, political and social structures and that they may not be transferable to lagging regions (Dunford and Hudson 1996). However, Amin (1999) has specifically argued that an ‘institutionalist’ perspective may well – if economic development policies are developed in a contextually-relevant manner – be particularly appropriate for less favoured regions.

**Partnership, institutional capacity and European regional policy**

Theoretical arguments about local governance, partnership and institutional capacity take on material form through their adoption within European policy initiatives. The Commission has been central in promoting the regional scale in the UK as the site for advancing socio-economic prosperity, and in encouraging regions (or at least certain groups claiming to represent the region) to be active partners in policy implementation (Lloyd and Meegan 1996; MacLeod 1999).4 European Structural Funds (including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF) are the main policy means of tackling European regional disparities, and partnership working has become a central requirement in European regional development programmes (Bachtler and Taylor 1996). As with UK central government, the precise meaning of partnership is not always clear. The assumed benefits are (enthusiastically) summarized by Jacobs (1997, 42):

partnerships are at the heart of current EU economic development and competitiveness initiatives because they facilitate innovation, bring diverse interests together and enable public authorities to cohere around common objectives.

Certainly, greater partnership working has been encouraged by the EC to encompass close consultations between the Commission, member states and regional and local authorities acting as partners in pursuit of common goals (Lloyd and Meegan 1996). The aim has been to extend participation in the decision-making process beyond the public sector, to community and business groups. Further, the Commission has increasingly seen regions as decentralized entities in their own right. Many EU structural initiatives assume the existence of ‘some form of effective and integrative regional body which can design and deliver Single Programming Documents (SPDs) to tackle economic development and foster social cohesion’ (MacLeod 1999, 239).

Whilst for the EU partnership may have represented a co-operative way of working, previous Conservative governments in the UK viewed it as a means by which to inject a private sector dynamism into what they saw as overly bureaucratic and inefficient (often Labour-controlled) local authorities. Further, although the Commission may have envisaged regionally-based partnerships as a means of increasing contact between itself and sub-national governments, successive Tory administrations favoured strong central control of locally-delivered programmes during the 1980s and 1990s. Government Offices for the Regions (GORs) were set up by central government to produce and to implement SPDs. In part, the establishment of GORs derived from what was deemed to be the successful operation of the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) programme which had insisted on the production of a strategic vision for an area, agreement on specific priorities and the delivery of projects (Miller 1999). However a number of local authorities were critical of such arrangements for dispensing EU funding because they appeared to undermine authorities’ own contribution to regional development strategies.
The attempt to promote a closer relationship between the European Commission and regional administrations is also related to notions of institutional capacity: ‘as global influences become ever greater and regional disparities increase, new institutional solutions are being put forward as central mechanisms for reinvigorating lagging regions’ (Raco 1999a, 966). To the extent that the operation of the Structural Funds pre-supposed the existence of regional communities able to construct strategies and to implement policies, EU policy is intended to assist the further development of institutional capacity within regions. In non-federal states such as the UK, this has proved problematic. As the introduction of Government Offices for the Regions demonstrates, the effect of EU policy has been to allow the continued supremacy of national government, or at least for it to be the dominant partner (McAteer and Mitchell 1996). In the next two sections of the paper, we address the development of partnership working and institutional capacity within the context of the operation of Structural Funds in a particular place.

**Economic restructuring in the Humber Sub-region during the post-war period**

The territorial manifestation of what is now termed the Humber Sub-region has a complex history. Local authority reorganization in 1974 led to the creation of the new county of Humberside, with a county council and nine districts in a lower tier. The appellation Humberside also became part of the official title of the standard UK region, Yorkshire and Humberside. However Humberside never won the affections of its residents, and much of the population remained fiercely loyal to Yorkshire or Lincolnshire. The formal abolition of Humberside in 1996 (replaced by a single-tier system of four unitary authorities: the East Riding of Yorkshire, Kingston-upon-Hull, North East Lincolnshire and North Lincolnshire) has led to the rather clumsy usage of the Humber Sub-region to describe the same area. Our focus upon the Sub-region in this paper, of course, is necessary given our engagement with regional economic development via European Structural Funding.

The Humber Sub-region is located on the eastern side of the UK (see Figure 1). Some 85 per cent of the land is agricultural, with most economic activity occurring in and around the three main centres of Hull, Grimsby and Scunthorpe and along the south Humber bank. The major distinguishing feature of the Sub-region for many years was the barrier to effective north-south communication and integration formed by the Humber estuary. This barrier contributed to the independent development of separate urban hierarchies on either bank of the Humber and was the driving force behind the construction of the Humber Bridge (opened in 1981). As the analysis of partnerships in the next section reveals, a ‘North bank-South bank’ divide remains one of the defining characteristics of the Sub-region’s political and economic structure.

During the 1960s, rapid industrial and employment growth took place on the south bank of the Humber. At the time, this was thought likely to continue as a consequence of the accession of Britain into the European Community; a local role in the exploitation of North Sea oil and gas resources; and readily available development space. However, by the 1980s the Sub-region witnessed ‘an apparent worsening of the regional economic situation and a failure to capitalise on its promising position’ (North et al. 1987, 2). A number of factors contributed to this decline. First, large-scale schemes for urban development were abandoned in an era of nationally slow population growth. Second, the benefits of EC membership were unevenly spread. Whilst some capital projects were encouraged, failure to renegotiate the Common Fisheries Policy and Community-wide policies to reduce steelmaking capacity severely curtailed economic growth (North et al. 1987). Third, the completion of the Humber Bridge was delayed by 5 years, post-dated motorway development on both north and south banks, and left local authorities with a high and growing debt. Fourth, the post-1979 years saw sub-regional manufacturing collapse with major job losses in local industries such as iron, steel and fisheries. Finally, regional aid was comparatively ineffective in attracting inward investment, with the partial exception of Scunthorpe where the closure of the Normanby Park steelworks led to the award of Development Area status from 1980 to 1993 and the establishment of two Enterprise Zones (North et al. 1987; Spooner 1987). There has been limited development of local institutional capacities in certain sectors of manufacturing, which lend uniqueness to the region’s industrial culture and institutional fabric. By the
1980s, 50 per cent of sub-regional manufacturing industry consisted of materials-processing facilities such as chemicals and food processing. On the south bank, the post-war period had witnessed an influx of industries such as fertilizers, pigments and artificial fibres, attracted to the location by abundant cheap land, proximity to the deep water port facilities of Immingham and the ability to discharge effluent into tidal waters. Two major oil refineries had also located and expanded in the area. On the north bank, Hull retained long established materials-processing industries. Food processing and animal foodstuff industries became increasingly capital intensive, whilst fish processing declined. 'Other materials processing' industries had been the largest employers in Humberside as late as 1978, but became severely depleted with the local contraction in iron and steel production.

Particularly on the South Bank, the local authorities have been able to focus partnership activities around certain specialized sectors such as food processing and chemicals: here local institutional capacities remain quite strong as compared to other sectors. Over the last decade the region has seen a shift away from primary, manufacturing and construction industries towards the service sector. Although growth in the service sector in this period mirrored the national picture, it proceeded from a much lower base. When compared with the
rest of the UK, employment in the Sub-region is approximately 6 per cent greater in manufacturing and 6 per cent less in banking, finance and insurance (Humberside TEC 1997). However, growth in service employment did not compensate for manufacturing job loss and higher order services were notably lacking, with service employment mainly related to port activities, distribution, transport and tourism (Yorkshire and Humberside SPD 1997).

This background of economic change and decline formed the context for the Sub-region’s eligibility for Structural Funds. In addition to funding for Steel Areas (which included Scunthorpe) there were Integrated Operational Programmes (using ERDF only) in Hull, Grimsby and Goole (HOPI in 1990–92 and HOPI II in 1992–93), with allocations of £11.96 million and £22.72 million respectively.5 The analysis of the sub-regional economy presented in the 1994–96 Single Programming Document highlighted a continued reliance upon manufacturing industry -- the presence of low growth declining industries was an important factor in parts of the Sub-region being given Objective 2 status. In July 1993 unemployment was 12.4 per cent compared to a national average of 11.8 per cent and an EU rate of 10.4 per cent (Yorkshire and Humberside SPD 1994). In the inner areas and peripheral estates of Hull, Grimsby and Scunthorpe high levels of unemployment combined with social, environmental and housing problems to produce geographical concentrations of multiple deprivation. The travel-to-work areas (TTWAs) of these three urban centres were the parts of the Sub-region to be given Objective 2 status (alongside a small part of the Doncaster TTWA). Seven local authority areas were thus included either in full or in part (see Figure 1).

The 1994–96 SPD sought to restructure the region as a whole away from dependence on traditional industries and towards growth sectors, such as services, high technology industries and tourism. The overall objective was for:

the development of a self-sustaining, strong and environmentally sustainable economy with a modern technological base and thriving SME sector, able to compete nationally and internationally and to generate good quality jobs for a workforce equipped with relevant skills, training and the creation of a pleasant environment in which to live and work (Yorkshire and Humberside SPD 1994, 47).

**Objective 2 status, partnership and the Humber Sub-region**

This section of the paper draws upon research conducted as part of an evaluation of the Objective 2 Programme which contained an explicit remit to consider the role and contribution of partnerships, programme management and project delivery. The study investigated existing partnerships, considered how different organizations were included in partnerships and solicited views about the implementation of the programme. We initially identified partnerships within the Sub-region through interviews with European officers in the four current local authority areas: North Lincolnshire, North East Lincolnshire, the East Riding of Yorkshire and Kingston-upon-Hull. These were followed by 15 in-depth interviews with a range of partners including Area Advisory Group (AAG) members,6 local authority officers, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and community groups. In addition the research investigated the experience of partnership working at the level of individual projects through a further set of interviews with 19 respondents involved with separate ERDF and ESF projects. Our findings suggest a weakness in the ability of the Humber Sub-region, in comparison with West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire, to draw down funding. Difficulties of political fragmentation within the Humber Sub-region were compounded by conflict across the Yorkshire and Humberside region as a whole. Second, the 1994–96 Programme was fundamentally shaped by priorities set by the Government Office for Yorkshire and Humberside (GOYH). Third, the research revealed that local authorities played a central role in project development, whilst private sector and voluntary and community interests tended to be marginalized.

As we have indicated, not all the Humber Sub-region was designated an Objective 2 area: the spatial coverage included large parts of the Sub-region south of the Humber, while north of the Humber the main focus was upon the city of Hull. In addition to Objective 2 status, a small part of the current East Riding area was designated for Objective 5b status. Additionally, some areas were eligible for certain Community Initiatives: RESIDER in Scunthorpe, KONVER in Hull and PESCA in Hull, Grimsby and Bridlington and Driffield.

The Single Programming Document for Yorkshire and Humberside 1994–96 was designed
to produce a range of key outputs: job creation; provision of advice to small businesses; creation of small firms; reclamation of land; provision of premises for manufacturing companies; and the number of town centres or communities improved. The Programme comprised a number of priorities for action under both ERDF and ESF, together with a series of measures under each priority (see Table I). In the Humber Sub-region, by numbers of projects, Priority 1 (Action to support SMEs) produced 41.3 per cent of the total. The second largest number of projects were in Priority 6 (Targeted action in key deprived areas: 24.3 per cent of the total). Priority 6 (£4 814 503) and Priority 5 (Action to develop the tourism and cultural industries – £4 444 192) involved the largest expenditures, accounting for 20.9 per cent and 19.3 per cent of total grant expenditure respectively. The high level of expenditure on tourism projects is in part a reflection of the Sub-region’s geographical characteristics (the coast) and the historical legacy of Victorian resort development. Interviews also pointed to a well-developed strategy – prior to Objective 2 status – promoted by pro-active local authority officers within certain parts of the Sub-region (such as Cleethorpes) who were aware of the potential of European funding to draw down grant aid. Thus much of the shape of the Programme was framed by the priorities of a key group of local authority officers with strong notions about what constituted appropriate projects. For example, few projects in the Sub-region addressed Priority 3 (technological change). Given the emphasis upon the need to improve existing local manufacturing competitiveness this is perhaps surprising, although some respondents attributed this to the inward-looking nature and local market orientation of local industry.

Prior to local government reorganization in 1996, involvement in Objective 2 bidding and

| Table I | Priorities and Measures in the Single Programme Document for Yorkshire and Humberside 1994–96 |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Priority 1 – Action to support SMEs**       |
| Measure 1 – venture capital funds            |
| Measure 2 – advice services for SMEs         |
| Measure 3 – business premises for small companies |
| Measure 4 – training for business needs (ESF) |
| **Priority 2 – Action to strengthen and diversify mature SMEs** |
| Measure 5 – help with development and growth |
| Measure 6 – spin-outs, partnerships and supply chains |
| Measure 7 – clean and lean technologies      |
| Measure 8 – training for new ways of working (ESF) |
| **Priority 3 – Action to strengthen the knowledge-based industries and develop advanced technology** |
| Measure 9 – support for innovation, product and process development |
| Measure 10 – increasing technology transfer activity in the region and strengthening business/academia links |
| Measure 11 – high technology training for employees and technology management training for managers, training in information communications technology (ESF) |
| Measure 12 – support for advanced telematics: help for SMEs to increase utilization of advanced networks and information services |
| **Priority 4 – Action to attract new industry and services** |
| Measure 13 – sites for industry               |
| Measure 14 – gateways for industry           |
| Measure 15 – human resources for new employers (ESF) |
| **Priority 5 – Action to develop the tourism and cultural industries** |
| Measure 16 – increasing the utilization of tourism facilities and upgrading facilities |
| Measure 17 – selected town centre environmental improvements |
| Measure 18 – support for the cultural industries |
| Measure 19 – training for quality in tourism and cultural industries (ESF) |
| **Priority 6 – Targeted action in key deprived areas** |
| Measure 20 – support for training and employment activities (ESF) |
| Measure 21 – support for community-based economic projects |
| Measure 22 – targeted environmental improvements |
| Measure 23 – access to work through improved public transport |

*Source: Yorkshire and Humberside Objective 2 Programme (1994).*
The institutional changes—the reform of local government—[worked] against us. People were jockeying for position—nobody knew exactly who was working for which authority... a very complicated situation to try to co-ordinate... It did tend to fragment a fair bit into the different localities (AAG member, local authority representative).

Further, the SPD for the Objective 2 Programme was designed for the broader region of Yorkshire and Humberside, even though its operation was at the level of the three sub-regional areas: Humberside, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire.

Rightly or wrongly, many Humber respondents believed that the SPD was biased towards the needs of West and South Yorkshire and that what were frequently referred to as the Humber Sub-region’s ‘special circumstances and needs’ were overlooked. Indeed, in terms of ERDF expenditure by measure across the sub-regions, the Humber Sub-region generally did account for a smaller proportion of overall ERDF expenditure in most measures compared with the other two sub-regions. The Humber Sub-region also had a very low proportion of ESF projects. By contrast, South Yorkshire accounted for by far the largest proportion of expenditure across the measures. There was a widely-held view among respondents that the Sub-region had under-bid for projects and funding. Various explanations were provided, the most significant being the impression that the Sub-region is peripheral with respect to the rest of the region and therefore ‘politically marginalized’, that capacity for the Sub-region to develop project bids is limited (perhaps related to its rural-urban mix), and there are particular problems with matching funds. For example:

... quite often in relatively non-metropolitan areas you have this problem [of under-bidding]... Really what we are talking about here is the density of economic opportunities and resources is much sparser in an area like Humberside... There are three things really: the viability of projects; the density of organizations that can come up with creative projects; and probably the knock-out blow really is the existence of matched funding is much weaker in the non-metropolitan areas simply because there isn’t the wealth... there aren’t the budgets around to sustain it (AAG member, higher education representative).

The problem that has been identified locally is: Is there enough matched-funding around to draw down the money that seems to be available? ... If you haven’t got an equivalent sum to match then you can’t do it (ERDF Project manager).

These arguments are not unique to the Humber Sub-region—Martin’s (1998) survey of Structural Funds operation in the UK, for example, argues that matching funding is the most important constraint in drawing down European funding in the majority of eligible areas. However, it is important to highlight the strength of the perception that the Sub-region was particularly disadvantaged.

Despite a certain degree of recognition that the Sub-region’s ‘underperformance’ did stem from the absence of partnership working, interviewees generally did not express concern about the situation. One rationale for this was that one of the most significant partnerships formed in the Humber Sub-region—the Area Advisory Group (AAG)—did not stem from particular projects but rather developed out of organizational arrangements made for previous rounds of EU funding. There was some concern about the absence of strategic thinking by the AAG:

... it was a free-for-all... Take tourism for example. There was a substantial tourism budget and it was nearly all gobbled up by Cleethorpes... Nobody said, well hang on a minute, do we really want to commit two thirds of the resources... to Cleethorpes [rather than have] a balanced tourism strategy (AAG member, higher education representative).

At the same time, many respondents felt that the AAG’s limited remit compromised its ability to be a pro-active partnership. It was suggested—even by members of the AAG itself—that the Area Advisory Group did not have a significant input into regional projects, that it lacked any strategic vision, and was involved in limited project follow-up. Several respondents also felt that the AAG operated as little more than a rubber stamp committee:
The AAG was confronted prior to the actual meetings with large numbers of appraisal documents which had been prepared by GOYH and with recommendations on them and really was asked to approve projects which were deemed recommended for approval (AAG member, higher education representative).

Projects presented to the AAG were ‘scored’ against a range of criteria to assess the eligibility and appropriate nature of the project. Many AAG interviewees suggested that this made it very difficult to argue against certain projects even if they had so desired. In direct contrast to the aims and objectives of the EU, funding and programme management tended to be project, rather than partnership, driven.

The central role of GOYH in directing the Programme led to complaints among partners and project managers that inefficiencies and delays hampered information flow between the Subregion and GOYH. Sometimes this affected the performance of the AAG:

[...] I would say on the whole we didn’t get enough information at [AAG] meetings to enable us to make proper decisions [...] To some extent, it was first come, first served (AAG member, local authority representative).

I saw it as a reflection of the lack of experience of the Secretariat. There were many occasions where I think that probably the people on the AAG knew significantly more about the process and the rules than the people who were speaking on behalf of GOYH (AAG member, local authority representative).

The AAG was comprised of representatives from the local authorities, higher and further education, the private sector, and voluntary organizations. However, in contrast Jacobs’ (1997, 48) account of the West Midlands where ‘partnerships provide corporate decision makers with a local presence and access to councillors and public officials and facilitate corporate “embeddedness” in local economies’, private sector involvement in the AAG was limited. In fact, the only significant private sector actors were Associated British Ports, the chambers of commerce and Humberside Training and Enterprise Council. Participation by the chambers of commerce was compromised by local splits which led to the creation of two chambers – one for Hull and the East Riding and one for the rest of Humberside. The involvement of ABP was similarly low-key and was largely confined to promoting (or blocking) projects where ABP had an interest at stake. Indeed, ABP acted more as a quasi-public sector organization than as a representative of private sector business interests. There was no representation from other sectors of the sub-regional economy, such as major private employers or industry groups, or from unions and other employee organisations. Few respondents saw this as a problem:

... [The AAG] was really a very interesting forum at which all the major interest groups from the region [met] which could have an impact on regional development ... (AAG member, higher education representative).

... [the Humber sub-region] has a very different identity from the other parts of Yorkshire and Humberside, so I think in that sense [the AAG] was quite a coherent group (AAG member, higher education representative).

The limited nature of private sector involvement frequently was attributed to lack of interest and the difficulties of involving individual firms or sectoral representatives in a process which may not have had direct benefits for them. Thus:

some private sector representatives turned up [to AAG meetings] initially ... but when they found out there was nothing in it for them personally they stopped coming (AAG member, local authority representative).

In some cases local authority respondents argued that sectoral interests (such as the offshore industry in Hull) were best served through local authority representation.

Similarly, there was fairly limited involvement by voluntary or community groups: there was only a single voluntary sector representative on the AAG, for example. Interviewees from the community and voluntary sectors also suggested that the AAG and other partner organizations in the Subregion tended to have an instrumentalist view of community-based projects and did not appear to encourage ‘grassroots’ participation. Projects which produced quantifiable ‘outputs’ tended to be favoured over those which actually met a local need or demand. Yet the AAG itself did not view this as problematic:

I think maybe the voluntary sector was heard less than the others. But I don’t think there was ever any evidence that individuals or sectors were not given the opportunity to say their piece (AAG member, local authority representative).

There was some evidence to suggest that the AAG’s ability to act pro-actively and develop a strategic approach increased over the course of the
funding period. The level of AAG interaction with other partnerships increased over the course of the funding period:

... as time went by other partnerships were formed so there was certainly an overlap of partnerships ... The clearest cases would be the Single Regeneration (SRB) partnerships [such as those in] Hull and Grimsby ... (AAG member, higher education representative).

However such partnerships in their early stages did tend to be local authority-led with only a limited role for the private sector or other actors.

Notwithstanding these incipient moves towards broader strategic partnership working, the delivery of the SPD in the Humber Sub-region remained dominated by individual project-based initiatives. Many respondents argued that this was a consequence of the 1994–96 SPD Programme – partnership was not a *sine qua non* at project level – and indeed many project interviewees took the view that ‘the partnership was at Programme level’ and thus not something about which they needed to be concerned. In most cases, there was relatively little attempt to integrate projects with sub-regional and regional economic goals and policies. There were a few instances where a project *had* been developed in the context of a broader regional plan, but this appeared to be in the minds of a few key individuals as opposed to a coherent strategy. Certainly there was little evidence of attempts to avoid overlap, either within the Sub-region or across the region as a whole. Many project managers simply assumed that this was a role that would be played by GOYH through the AAG. There was thus very little evidence of local partnerships coming forward to develop projects, or of partnerships being developed as a consequence of project operation.

One result of the project-based nature of the SPD was an emphasis more on the ‘hardware’ of economic development (physical infrastructure and site development) than on developing the ‘software’ side (innovation, small business growth, research and development, knowledge-based projects, training, etc.). This was compounded by the dominance of local authority actors in the process. Local authorities appeared to be more interested in infrastructure projects, while private sector partners were more interested in bidding for business support measures. ‘Hard’ infrastructure measures were therefore bid for more readily than ‘soft’ infrastructure measures. There was some concern that there had been little interest, on the part of local authorities, in encouraging other organizations to develop project bids. In *Lloyd and Meegan’s (1996)* analysis of the operation of the Structural Funds, this situation is characterized as a principle of *take*: regional planning and policy objectives recede in the face of the need to bring forward projects and spend funding against a tight timetable.

Towards the end of the 1994–96 period the Humber Forum (comprising representatives from the four local authorities’ economic development departments and Humberside TEC) was established in an attempt to develop a strategic approach to sub-regional development and to provide an overarching framework for the four new unitary authorities’ economic development strategies. However, beyond producing a strategy document, the Humber Forum was (and remains) relatively powerless to influence policy. Overall the view of respondents was that the 1994–96 SPD had not involved the development of a partnership acting on behalf of the sub-region, but had led to partners judging the success of the Programme in terms of how much it had contributed to their own strategies and economic development aims:

there tended not to be an awful lot of debate about other peoples’ projects, except where they threatened. If their projects were approved there would be less resources for a project you knew you had coming forward – the reason for asking questions on projects – was very much with a view to the impact it would have on your own activities (AAG member, local authority representative).

On reflection many respondents believed that the AAG might have provided a forum for discussing how projects should meet Sub-regional goals/objectives, but this remains undeveloped.

The subsequent 1997–99 SPD sought to develop ‘local action plans’ at the local authority level. In some cases there was a conscious recognition that the partnership process needed to be extended, resulting in widespread consultation and involvement (e.g. North East Lincolnshire Partnership 1997). However, such local action plans largely see strategy as something to be developed for the local authority area, reflecting the continued dominance of local authority interests in the process. Local capacity to undertake a broader overview or to address difficulties of overlapping between projects remains poorly developed through the Humber...
Forum. Nor did other developments in the SPD process for 1997–99 augur well for the development of a strategic vision for the Sub-region. In addition to the four local action plans, there was a Sub-regional action plan for the Humber (dealing with projects planned to operate across the Sub-region), a regional action plan and any number of thematic and sectoral action plans (for example for the media industries, the food industry, environmental industries) against which to bid and spend ERDF/ESF funds. This plethora of plans frequently is contradictory, creating confusion for those developing projects who must explain to GOYH how their individual projects fit in with all these action plans. If, as MacLeod (1999, 245) has argued, ‘the presence of a dynamic collective representation, a wide knowledge base, and relations of local institutional mutuality and trust, are viewed to be increasingly vital in animating strategies for effective regional-scale socio-economic development and governance’, the potential for the development of the Humber Sub-region, at least through use of the Structural Funds, looks to be extremely limited in terms of its vision, scope and strategy.

Conclusions: not enough partners and too many plans?

We have drawn upon the example of the operation of EU Structural Funds in the Humber Sub-region as means of reflecting upon both the wider debates about local government, governance and institutional capacity in the UK and upon the prospects for future economic development in the Sub-region. Our case study has revealed a significant and continuing role for local government, rather than a shift to fundamentally new structures of governance systems (see also Leach 1996; Raco 1997). There was some evidence of a centralization of state power, in that the Government Office for Yorkshire and Humberside was centrally involved in the Objective 2 programme, both in negotiations with the European Commission and through the teams of secondees working with the three sub-regions within Yorkshire and Humberside. However, the detailed operation of the Structural Funds programme has been particularly dominated by local authority interests, initially through Humberside County Council and subsequently via the four successor unitary authorities. Hence the argument that we have seen the demise of local government to become ‘strategic enablers’ and one actor amongst many is difficult to reconcile with the Humber case study (see also Lawless 1994; Imrie and Raco, 1999). Further, we would concur with Imrie and Raco’s (1999) contention that theorizations of a proposed shift from local government to governance produce an oversimplified duality between old and new structures.

Our account also has indicated that despite the emphasis in EU policy on partnership (Jacobs 1997), the 1994–96 Objective 2 Programme in the Humber Sub-region involved a fairly minimalist approach to partnership working in the area. This may be a common feature of the Objective 2 programme as a whole (see Bachtler and Taylor 1996). Our interviewees in fact saw no significant need to develop partnership working outside of the Area Advisory Group itself. This was particularly the case at project level, despite the fact that the SPD called for capacity building and partnership as part of the funding process. Additionally, although the AAG did not have an official remit to develop a Sub-regional strategy, it failed to make even tentative steps towards doing so.

In large part the absence of a Sub-regional strategy is a function of the ‘manufactured’ nature of the former county of Humberside and the absence of a sub-regional ‘voice’. Particularly following local government reorganization, the Objective 2 Programme was dominated by a small elite of local authority officers acting for the specific interests of areas within the Sub-region. The role of other business or voluntary and community sector partners was minimal at both Programme and project level. Other commentators have noted that local political agendas may well come to be dominated by public sector elites (Cochrane 1993; Raco 1997), and have suggested that we need to pay particular attention to the ways in which particular place-based agents or coalitions act in the name of particular regions (MacLeod 1999).

The weakness of partnership dynamics indicates that institutional capacity for strategic economic development to draw down funds and deliver projects within the Sub-region remains poorly developed. The Humber case may not be unique within the English context (Lloyd and Meegan 1996), although in other Objective 2 areas in Europe, there has been a ‘stimulus given to the development of regional partnerships and the capacity to plan and manage regional development strategies’ (Bachtler and Michie 1997, 854). The lack
of capacity building has been especially acute in the case of ESF, where the Humber Sub-region has one of the highest levels of underspend in the EU despite a widespread recognition locally that low levels of training, skills attainment and education achievement are serious problems for the local economy (Humberside TEC 1997).

At one level, our arguments about the lack of partnership working and the failure of the sub-region to develop significant institutional capacity are perhaps straightforward enough: a variety of factors in what some might view as an ‘under-developed’ region have contributed to the development of a situation in which there are ‘not enough partners and too many plans’. If institutional capacity is a precondition for ‘success’ in a region, then the future for the Humber sub-region appears bleak. Yet as we have noted, notions of institutional capacity and governance often are weakly conceptualized within discussions of regional policy; and arguments about the link between economic development and institutional capacity frequently assume a direct causal connection between the two. Thus we would argue that the most interesting questions posed by the Humber example are not those which relate to the ‘fit’ of an ideal type model of public/private partnerships – those which seek to determine whether or not EU Structural Fund programmes have worked as ‘templates for action’ (Amin 1999).

Rather, our paper seeks to open up political questions about how regional development should best proceed. In the Humber case, the most effective form of development might well involve strong leadership from the public sector. It may not be the case that (sub)regional prosperity could be easily achieved if only the appropriate private sector partners could be found. Institutional capacity might be most appropriately directed and shaped by those local authorities which have had experience in grappling with, for example, the history of economic decline in the Humber sub-region. In an era when the mantra of public/private partnership is repeated unremittingly, this may be a relatively unfashionable argument, but we find it compelling nonetheless.

At a theoretical level, transformations in the Humber sub-region can be conceptualized as representing a hollowing out of state form, rather than state power (Jessop 1997). As MacLeod and Goodwin (1999b, 522) have argued, ‘regimes, partnerships, networks, coalitions and institutional thicknesses have to be constructed, managed and maintained – and at present a critical part in this is played by the national state’. Further, our work has sought to address the bias in discussions of institutional capacity towards ‘successful’ or transitional regions rather than seeking to theorize processes at work in less developed regions. Here, it is important not simply to utilize trends such ‘hollowing out’ as explanation in themselves: rather, as MacLeod and Goodwin (1999b, 515) have advocated, our research has sought to examine ‘structures, mechanisms and events that actually constitute these processes in different places’. Finally, it is important that discussions of governance and institutional capacity be attentive to questions of scale. Existing work has tended to assume a direct link between the regional scale and the development of institutional capacity in particular places. In our view, spatial scale is highly contingent. Particularly in areas characterized by significant political and economical fragmentation, notions of ‘the region’ cannot be taken as given.

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**Notes**

1 Limitations of space preclude an extensive review of the literature on the relationship between notions of local government and the local state, however we concur with Cochrane’s (1993, 5) contention that ‘the fragmentation of local government has led to a proliferation of different agencies which need to be considered as part of the local state, both in the fields of welfare and economic development’. Empirically, our own focus clearly extends beyond simply the
dynamics of local government, although as we argue below, local authorities have played an important role in administering EU Structural funds.

2 It could equally be argued that local authorities have not always acted in democratically accountable ways either.

3 There is of course a significant issue as to what constitutes ‘success’ in regional or local economic development terms. Success is measured, if at all, through fairly conventional notions of GDP growth, inward investment attracted and so on. Social and environmental measures are frequently neglected – the ‘economic success’ of Southeast England, for example, does not take into account the negative aspects of environmental pollution, congestion costs or the social impacts of long travel to work times. See also Allen and Henry’s (1995) discussion of the ‘down side’ of growth in the Southeast.

4 We should note that in highlighting the ways in which a particular interpretation of institutional capacity has been translated into public policy, we do not necessarily concur with such a translation. We are particularly wary of, for example, the reification of the locality or the region within the context of debates about globalization, and are aware of the more pragmatic difficulties of retaining investment locally (see also Jones and MacLeod 1999).

5 ESF in this period was administered through the Eastern England ESF Unifund, worth £19.08 million in the period 1990–93, but this included an allocation for the East Midlands region.

6 Area Advisory Groups were established in each of the three sub-regions (the Humber Sub-region, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire) as part of the organizational arrangements to disburse EU funding. The AAGs were intended to be a partnership of the main actors within the sub-regions and interacted with a team of civil servants (often on secondment) within Government Office assigned to each sub-region.

7 The Structural Fund contribution to the 1994–96 Yorkshire and Humberside Programme was £198.4 million (Yorkshire and the Humber Objective 2 Programme 1997).

8 It is also worth noting at this point that there were significant delays in the 1994–96 Programme coming on stream. The SPD was not approved until 16 December 1994 and ERDF projects were not considered for approval until Spring 1995. ESF had an annual bidding round and all three rounds were launched in 1995. As the 1997 SPD comments: ‘work on the development of good quality projects to meet the objectives and targets of the SPD has inevitably been compressed and the development of strategic partnerships was slow, with subsequent delays in putting together projects in those areas which depend upon partnership working’ (Yorkshire and the Humber Objective 2 Programme 1997, 61).

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