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Governance and Meta-Bureaucracy?

Perspectives of local governance 'partnership' in England and Scotland

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Abstract

This paper assesses the nature of partnerships through the research site of local governance in England and Scotland, engaging a range of debates and literature around governance and meta-governance. The research used secondary data of local authority partnership working in England and Scotland as well as primary qualitative data from participant observation and interviews with senior officials of local authorities and partner organisations. There is little to suggest English and Scottish practices are significantly at variance and the paper advances an argument of meta-bureaucracy to describe partnerships' activities: that is to say, partnerships do not represent a growth of autonomous networks and governance arrangements but rather an extension of bureaucratic controls. State actors remain pre-eminent within increasingly formalised systems of 'partnership'.

Keywords: governance; co-governance; bureaucracy, accountability; local governance

Introduction

Partnership and governance structures are increasingly the instruments used to deliver public services at local, sub-national and national levels. Partnerships are referred to as the consensual regulation shared by public, civic and professional actors in delivering public services (Bode, 2006). The aim is ostensibly to improve public service planning and delivery in a 'joined up' way, and advance democratic and civil society inclusion.

The theoretical underpinning of governance has generated a volume of literature on how the UK is currently governed, ranging from consideration of the 'hollowing out of the state' and the growing influence of self organising networks (Richards and Smith, 2002; Rhodes, 1997); the exploration of the proliferation of non-state actors; the interdependency and resource exchanges between these actors (Stoker, 2004; Pierre and Peters, 2000); debates around the 'multiple centred' or 'polycentric' nature of the state (Skelcher, 2005; 2000; Skelcher et al, 2005); interactions between various network actors (e.g. Rhodes, 2000); the extent to which governments are restricted to steering and monitoring with financial inducements rather than more direct forms of control and delivery (e.g. Stoker, 2000); etc. Further, some scholars suggest the power of the state may have declined, while others suggest that the state operates within a complex network of multiple modes of governance (see Jessop, 2003; Whitehead, 2003; Lukes, 2004; Tenbensel, 2005).

The multi-actor environment, implicit in governance diversity of networks and partners, has in turn produced a rich literature, and associated research on the fragmented and pluralised delivery of public services. The myriad of public sector reforms have attracted much attention from research in new public management to 'new public governance' (Osborne, 2009; Needham, 2007; McLaughlin, Osborne and Ferlie, 2002; Clarke and Newman, 1997).

The literature on co-governance and the overall supervision and oversight of these arrangements (termed meta-governance) focuses on twin themes. The first of these themes surrounds the process of governance and meta-governance. Meta-governance involves managing the complexity, plurality and tangled hierarchies found in prevailing modes of coordination (Jessop, 2004:70). Governments play a role in meta-governance by being involved in the redesigning of markets, in constitutional change and the juridicial re-regulation of organisational objectives, and in organising the conditions of self-organisation (ibid). Thus, meta-governance does not eliminate other modes of coordination – markets, hierarchies and heterarchies still exist but they operate in a context of 'negotiated decision making' (Jessop, 2004:70-71). Furthermore, according Jessop (2004:71) in terms of meta-governance the 'state is no longer sovereign authority…It becomes just one participant among pluralistic guidance system…'

Local government is a key site in this arena of governance and meta-governance process. As Stoker (1997:53) argues, 'The overall effect can be summarised as a shift from a system of local government to a system of local governance. Local authorities now share to a greater extent than before…decision making responsibilities with other agencies'. This reconfiguration became evident within local government by the late 1990s (Johnson and Osborne, 2003; Agranoff and McGuire, 1998; 2003; Kelly, 2006; Bovaird, 2007). Through a series of legislative and cultural changes, local governance itself became mainstreamed. Consequently, in the last ten to fifteen years there has been an 'explosion of partnerships' surrounding local government (Jones and Stewart, 2009: 63) and various modes of governance have emerged (Tenbensel, 2005). In the New Labour era, the theme of partnership dominated thinking and practice in public service delivery. Similarly, the current coalition government in the UK speaks of a 'Big Society'; inclusive of citizens, civil society and government in co-governance arrangements solving policy problems and delivery public services at locality level. Partnership conjures up a relationship and a discourse with which it is hard to take issue: it is difficult to be against partnership. It appears to be pragmatic, consistent with the 'what works' approach. It reduces the burden of funding that falls directly on the public sector. It sounds inclusive, appearing to offer an alternative to the private sector model and, at least superficially, to the neo-liberal agenda. A comprehensive study of local partnerships in 2002 found more than 5,500 local partnerships with spending approaching £5bn and with 75000 partnership board members (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). The scale and scope of this patchwork of bodies presents co-ordination difficulties for those commissioning and delivering public services as well as for users (Rhodes, 2000). Nonetheless, successive UK governments have embraced co-governance arrangements in recognition that traditional institutional boundaries are too unwieldy to deal with complex, cross-cutting and 'wicked' policy issues (Ling, 2002; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002; Newman 2001).

The second theme is about structures, institutions and actors in the process (Borzel and Risse 2010). The overall theme of the paper analyses the extent to which the bureaucratic institutions in our case research are signalling a new form of bureaucratic decision making, aligned to an environment of governance, and meta-governance as outlined above.

There is no doubt that governance, partnership structures and meta-governance processes affect the constituent bureaucracies. Co-governance signals an arrangement where public and other agencies are involved in the formulation of policy, planning and / or delivery of services (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006: 497). The delivery of public services through co-governance has resulted in an unresolved tension between the differentiation and integration of public services, with consequent impact on staff, skills, structure, management style and

functioning (Brandsen and van Hout, 2006) and accountability arrangements (Johnston Miller, McTavish and Pyper, 2011; Leach and Lowndes, 2007). There are studies of partnerships which identify the persistence of hierarchy and control through analysis of the 'architecture' behind partnerships (e.g. Whitehead 2007). In local government conventionally, hierarchy and bureaucracy are the key mechanisms for resource allocation and management, with an assumption of the hegemony of public sector institutions, democratically mandated, implementing and delivering public services. Contemporary aspects of local government underpin this view and remain distinctly 'traditional' and top down: in Scotland and England the majority of local government spending comes from central government (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2009; Audit Scotland, 2010), establishing accountability to the centre through performance and financial audits.

The aim of the paper is to examine local government partnerships and their constituent bureaucracies, testing them through the lens of four theses of governance, adapted from Rhodes' characterisation of interactions between actors within governing networks (Rhodes, 2000). Rhodes (2000:61) describes governance as:

> These networks are characterised, first, by interdependence between organisations. Governance is broader than government, covering non-*state actors…Second, there are* continuing interactions between network members, caused by the need to exchange resources and negotiate a shared purpose. Third, these interactions are game-like, rooted *in trust and regulated by rules of the game…Finally, the networks have significant degree* of autonomy from the state. Networks are not accountable to the state; they are self-organising.

Thus, the theses include:

1. The involvement of state and non-state actors in a network caused by a need to exchange resources and negotiate shared purpose.

2. Networks are characterised by interdependence between organisations.

3. Interactions are game-like rooted in trust.

4. Networks have a significant degree of autonomy and are not accountable to the state, but self-organising.

The Research Site: Local Authorities Partnerships and Governance

Local authorities and their associated partnerships provide a good research base given the direction of travel of local government on partnerships and governance in the last two decades. In England the scope and number of local authority-led partnerships have increased since the late 1990s. Previously much partnership activity was focused around fairly narrowly defined economic regeneration outcomes, but attention shifted towards wider objectives and joint working in all areas of activity. Specifically, the Local Government Act 2000 established 'well being' powers and laid out the frameworks for partnership work, the Health Act 1999 and National Health Service Act 2006 removed some obstacles to joint working and pooled budgets and enabled joint commissioning and integrated provision. The Children Act

2004 and the Police Reform Act 2002 did much the same for partnership working in their respective fields. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in English council areas were established under the Local Government Act 2000 with the role of thematic partnerships to strategically commission services (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008: 46).

All English councils have some kind of LSP but it is not a statutory body and has no corporate status. It has been a mechanism, both strategic and operational, for delivering the Community Strategy and the Local Area Agreements (LAA) which set out "...the "deal" between central government and local authority and their partners to improve services and the quality of life for local people' (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008: 34). Although LSPs do not all work in the same way, they have served as vehicles for strategic and community planning with a range of partners, while the LAA focussed attention on local priorities, agreed with local partners and central government, and measured by national indicators.

Since the UK General Election of 2010, partnership working in England has undergone a change of emphasis. The coalition government abolished LAAs and the corresponding national indicator set. Hence, while LSPs remain, some of their work has disappeared as part of a move against the inherited local performance regime. There is new provision for Local Enterprise Partnerships, the first 24 of which were announced in October 2010 with a principal focus on local economic development. Legislation is also in prospect: the government states that its current Localism Bill "builds upon" the abolition of LAAs to reduce further the "...hugely complex and expensive system of performance data sets, targets and inspection used by central government to control local government." (DCLG, 2010: 6). The legacy of LAAs remains the collective ('joined up') working of public service providers for common purpose, with local government given the lead role in driving partnership forward, including the duty to co-operate, the alignment of strategy and, to some extent, the pooling of budgets.

Scotland had developed a comparable set of arrangements. The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 required councils to initiate, facilitate and maintain community planning to ensure organisations work together to provide better public services. Indeed, the Act established a duty on local authorities and other agencies to implement community planning in partnership with citizens and civil society.

In terms of policy and regulatory instruments, English and Scottish local authorities adopted co-governance arrangements. The objectives of the reform and improvement in partnership working are 'virtually indistinguishable from those pursued south of the border' (see Downe et al 2008:77). Furthermore, co-governance in Scotland became entrenched with Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) from 2008, involving 'joined up' partnership working between local authorities and other actors to achieve outcomes based on the Scottish Government's five purpose targets and fifteen national outcomes (see http://www.scotland.gov.uk/221748). The priority given to the national outcomes framework, based on local authority led partnership working can be seen in the internal reviews of the Scottish Government's work (Scottish Government, 2010). Following the Crerar Review (2007) it is envisaged that performance measures within the Scottish public sector will be streamlined. Thus, it is currently suggested that performance measures of local authorities, Best Value Reviews, be inclusive of SOAs and thereby a measure of the extent of partnership working in achieving national objectives.

Research Methodology

The research is based on a case study analysis of two anonymized local authority partnerships; one in England and the other in Scotland. Local government in Scotland is a devolved function. The research design was therefore to investigate local authority co-governance in England and Scotland, given that local government is the function of different polities, but both have regulatory and policy instruments for partnerships at local government level.

The research involved secondary data of local authority partnership working and primary, qualitative data in the form of participant observation and elite interviews with senior officials of two local authorities and their partners. The interviews, following a semi-structured questionnaire, included senior officers of various public organisations and members of civil society organisations who were strategically involved in the partnership decision making. The focus was extant partnership working involving a network of state and non-state actors for both local authorities. Standardised questions were used in a number of themed areas: impetus for the partnership; nature of the link between community planning and the partnership; relationship between the partnership and the over-arching macro instrument and agreement; specific questions on the nature of activities and the extent of co-operation (e.g. information sharing, joint development of delivery plans, funding and budgetary arrangements); reporting lines and accountability of partnership members for activities and resource use. There was a shared purpose to the partnerships − both local authorities and their partners were involved and committed to regeneration and other aspects of service delivery in their respective areas. In addition there is a further comparability of the cases − both local authorities are within large urban areas with relatively high indices of deprivation and social exclusion. The cases were also selected based on the longevity (more than 10 years) of the partnership. Cases were therefore based on established partnerships rather than temporary, task or project based entities. We assume the longevity of working also allowed for the development of social capital and trust (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; 2003) − a principle of the governance thesis. A further aspect of the governance thesis was that these partnerships were self-organising in the sense that the development of the networks preceded statutory and regulatory policy instruments. The partnerships therefore, in formulation, had a degree of autonomy from the state, before the regulations were introduced. In both cases the local authorities received good performance reviews for partnership working and could be considered good practice examples. Table 1 illustrates the primary data collection methods and approach. Based on the research, our analysis is framed around Rhodes (2000) description of governance, as a testable thesis.

Table 1: Interviews Undertaken November 2009 – March 2010

Interviewee / Organisation Type	n = 30	Title
Partnership Chair	1	Partnership Chair
Local government	1	Chief Executive

Local government	13	Partnership and Regeneration manager, Economic Development Manager / Team Leader (n=2), Policy Manager (n=5), Head of Communities (n=5)
Education	1	College Principal
Voluntary / third sector	1	Chief Executive
Voluntary / third sector	2	Training Co-ordinator, Community Safety Officer
Police	1	Divisional Commander
Central government – locally employed and based	8	Job Centre Partnership managers (n=5), Head of Planning NHS, Chief Executive/Director – NHS body (n=2)
Central government	2	Team Leader, core civil service directorate, Team Leader, Enterprise Directorate Team

Research Findings

Thesis 1: Governance involves state and non-state actors in a network caused by a need to exchange resources and negotiate shared purpose.

In both cases the networks were self-organising and the partnerships developed out of the local authorities' political leadership commitment to improve the local area. The policy instruments now offer a driver or a steer: as one interviewee in England stated, 'community planning was there, but now it fits better'. The partnerships involve state actors from local authorities, the NHS, central government, transport services, education, and police; and non-state actors from civic society organisations. Co-governance between the members of the partnerships is at the level of service delivery planning. In both cases this is evident in addressing social exclusion policy areas such as youth unemployment and addiction services. Much co-governance centred on 'cross cutting' policy issues where health, community safety, transport, economic regeneration, social cohesion and community based services intersect. The case study analysis revealed that co-governance was limited to sharing of service delivery plans and attempts at alignment. Where co-production did take place this was limited to specific areas of joint delivery such as, in England, apprenticeships, community safety and reduction of drug use, and, in Scotland, addiction services, some services for the elderly and apprenticeships.

There is limited resource exchange. Strategic joint resourcing for service provision presents a much patchier and less aligned pattern. At issue is the fact that different services have funding routed through different organisations like local councils, health boards, primary care trusts etc, and are accountable to different central government departments and, ultimately, their Ministers. Managers and officials in these departments and service organisations are

responsible for spending in their respective areas of control. Pooled funds have no separate legal existence. Fund hosts must ensure that pooled fund income and spending is properly accounted for, that performance is reported on, and that end of year under or over spending is properly reported in partners' accounts (CIPFA, 2001). Survey work carried out by the Audit Commission in England indicated LSP partners perceived significant obstacles to pooling or aligning ranging from 'different organisational cultures' to 'poor understanding of others' financial planning and governance arrangements' to 'internal financial pressures' to 'confusing of accountability to government departments' (Audit Commission, 2009). Indeed in the English case study, an interviewee identified the absence of pooled budgets as an obstacle to co-governance. And in the Scottish case study a senior officer stated that budgets were not shared since service directors are accountable for their respective budgets.

Some budgets are aligned according to policy priorities; often areas of funding are ring-fenced by central government (e.g. addiction, child safety), but it would not be accurate to say that mainline budgets are integrated and resources shared. The limitations of co-governance and resource exchange can be summarised by the following interviewee:

> In this Partnership we work well together, some areas don't work as well as we do here. But to do significantly more joint service delivery will not be easy beyond the 'paper exercise' level. More joint delivery - some might say real joint delivery - could only come with pooled budgets, joint and even unified management and organisation structures. There's barriers to this. (Executive Director, Community Health Partnership and Partnership Board member)

Thus, although in both cases co-governance emerged not out of a regulatory or policy instrument but rather by a shared purpose, there is limited resource exchange. Even now with regulatory frameworks, which have institutionalised co-governance, the continuing interaction is a commitment to local area improvement and joint service delivery which may be more a function of financial and performance incentives. So although these instances are important and significant, the limitations of further co-production should be recognised:

> *Certainly I don't envisage a situation where all or even mo*st services could be delivered by a single public sector management or organisation structure, but there are some areas I suppose where we could have completed pooled funding and integrated management – *older people's services, mental health, learning disa*bility - much beyond this is difficult in my view. (Executive Director, Community Health Partnership)

Thesis 2: Governance networks are characterised by interdependence between organisations.

A major issue is the nature of relationships among partnership members, including the extent to which there is an interdependence with all partners substantively contributing to the work, programmes and leading activities (i.e. approaching symmetry in relationships) or, alternatively, whether activities, roles and contributions show patterns of differential contribution and dependence (i.e. asymmetrical) (Madden, 2010; Agranoff and McGuire, 2001). The research revealed that, in both cases, local authorities played a dominant role in shaping the policy agenda and strategic planning. In fact in the Scottish case there appears to be stronger co-governance between the local council and the NHS relative to co-governance with other partners. This may be explained by the fact that in Scotland there is statutory obligation to include local councillors on NHS Health Boards. In the English case, the asymmetry of relationships derived from historical factors. Even in the years when there was

established practice of partnership working with both the health authorities and the local umbrella group for the voluntary sector, the council itself had a centralist culture. Subsequent legislation and elements of 'modernisation' served to broaden the range of active partners but with the local authority playing a central role, partly through the then government's provision of reward for meeting targets. As the Economic Development Team leader remarked, 'funding and reward bolsters co-operation'.

In the relationship between the partnership-locality and the centre, there was evidence of the latter's attempts to steer or influence. This is consistent with other research findings by Kelly (2006), Agranoff and McGuire (1998), Bell and Hindmoor (2009) and Ackerman (2003). This is articulated for example in various policy documents such as the 2001 White Paper from the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions which stated that:

> Councils will make their most effective contribution if, alongside central government, they take responsibility for key national priorities and instigate corrective action when standards are not met (Cm 5237 para 3.6).

In Scotland, the introduction of SOAs has seen the alignment of service delivery planning and national objectives with the CEO of local authorities signing the agreements and thereby being held accountable for the delivery of outcomes as outlined in the agreements. In other words, local authorities and by extension their local partners are service deliverers helping deliver key national priorities. The Scottish Government official who is the link for this case study partnership stated that;

> Who is accountable to Parliament is an issue. We [the Scottish Government] are accountable for the shape of this but this administration has made it clear that it will hold the delivery arm to account for services - *this has not been fully tested…how would this* accountability be tested - you cannot really take the money away and it's a political issue.

In the English case, formal accountabilities reside in the council's cabinet, where the executive councillors, who act as portfolio lead members have responsibilities connecting directly to those within the strategic partnership. Outside the cabinet, the overview and scrutiny function introduces another strand of accountability, insofar as non-executive councillors in this council take a proactive stance toward their own scrutiny role and have initiated specific programmes of activity relating to partnership priorities e.g. around youth unemployment. The corporate policy manager remarked, in relation to accountability, that the people involved need to be 'senior enough'; while no sanctions are applied to those who do not fulfil their roles in the partnership, there are 'reputations at stake'.

Indeed, a recurring theme in both case studies was that each public sector organisation had to account for financial and service delivery performance through various audits and was ultimately answerable to political leadership at local and national levels. Thus although there are internal accountabilities among co-governance members, the traditional Weberian bureaucratic arrangements within state actors' organisations exist with accountability to political leadership, and an adherence to policy instruments which embed financial and performance measures. This supports an asymmetrical relationships rather than an interdependence thesis. Furthermore, as Agranoff and McGuire (2003) argue, to assert that in terms of inter-organisational relations in governance arrangements, government is relegated to the status of just another organisation is inaccurate; rather that government is a critical ingredient in intergovernmental networks. Thus, the nature of accountability within public bureaucracies; i.e. the importance placed on accountability of public monies, the efficient and

effective delivery of public services, shifts the balance of interactions within co-governance towards state actors rather than one of inter-dependencies.

Thesis 3: The governance interactions are game-like rooted in trust.

The literature suggests that trust is important to governance interactions (Rhodes, 2000; Agranoff and McGuire, 2001). Accountability and reporting mechanisms within the cases appear to be based on trust built up over a lengthy period of time. Many interviewees attested to the commitment and leadership within member organisations, and internal accountability. A NHS senior officer articulated this view:

> There is a Partnership Agreement which is part of overall accountability. The Partnership is responsible for the Single Outcome Agreement and is accountable to the Scottish Government. The Single Outcome Agreement has been signed by the partners so there is a collective responsibility, but we are individually accountable for certain areas, for example health indicators are the responsibility of the NH*S…but there is internal accountability for this, peer accountability…a pride in the success of the Partnership* (NHS Head of Planning and Partnership Board Member).

So there appears to be a perception or expectation that there is internal accountability within the partnership but that there is ultimate accountability towards the centre. A similar view held by interviewees in the English case study. Each partner brought their own formal internal accountabilities to the co-governance arrangement. An Economic Development manager discerned 'two strands' of accountability: first, the clarity that comes with being an officer of the council; but, secondly, the 'practicalities' within the partnership itself which can be more 'blurred', not least because of the large number of organisations involved. Jones and Stewart (2009:63) have examined the nature of accountabilities in LSPs and found the position to be 'confused', but see the local authority role in partnership as crucial, especially the established relationships of accountability and the community leadership role.

Thus, there seem to be traditional forms of accountability from various state actors within the partnership, juxtaposed with internal accountabilities within co-governance. Partners within co-governance appear to be holding each other accountable in a game-like interaction. This may be explained by mutual adjustments and interior authority (see Woods, 2003; Ackerman, 2003). According to Woods (2003) as government structures become less insulated the emphasis is shifted to interior authority where particular rationalities of government involve the internalisation and responsibilisation of self-discipline or self-surveillance. While this may be true certainly in the case studies, there appears to be consciousness by partners in co-governance of mutual adjustment and self-regulation for the purpose of accountability towards the centre. Thus, trust is built upon game-like interactions through internal accountability with each partner cognisant of their vertical accountability through a hierarchy towards the centre. The 'game' is therefore more a function of accountability towards and steering by the centre than trust per se. The pattern of internal accountability within the partnership between members is tangible, but nonetheless within a clear understanding of vertical accountability to the centre/ national levels. The game-like interaction is framed through vertical accountabilities which provide limits to the interaction and the extent of exchanged resources. Trust is therefore bounded within the artefact of interactions. For example, a civil society organisation involved in addressing social exclusion was aware of the limits of the local authority budget and 'trusted' the local authority in delivering upon social inclusion plans within the limited available resources with an awareness that the local

authority would deliver upon objectives given the accountability to central agencies and the political leadership on this policy priority area. Similarly, the local authority 'trusted' the civil society organisation to play its part in achieving objectives aware of the civil society's own accountabilities and the possibility of the local authority's ability to withdraw resources if the civil society did not deliver upon objectives. Thus, the interaction is game-like through mutually assured 'trust' based on accountabilities rather than real trust based on social capital (see Agranoff and McGuire, 1998).

Thesis 4: Governance networks have a significant degree of autonomy and are not accountable to the state, but self-organising.

This is perhaps the most contentious aspect of the governance thesis. Scholars of public administration will argue that the activities of state actors are subject to accountabilities even when in a self-organising network (see Power, 1999). This research suggests that although in both cases co-governance took place through self-organisation and preceded policy and regulatory instruments, all state actors are accountable through a hierarchy to political leadership from local to central government levels. Indeed, even the non-state actors, e.g. professionalised voluntary sector organisations, were accountable to various governing bodies (see Kelly, 2007; Jackson, 2010; Johnson and Osborne, 2003). Interviewees from voluntary sector organisations recognised their subsidiary role and their resource dependency with regards to state actors. Voluntary sector organisations have become part of the 'governable terrain' with the formal dimensions of partnership such as accountability for performance ensuring that voluntary sector organisations are 'drawn into and made subject to processes of state governing' (Carmel and Harlock, 2008:167).

Policy documents embed hierarchical accountability as indicated within an Audit Commission report. It states that: (a) the council is the legally accountable body, 'Local Area Agreements do create legal relationships. When the Secretary of State signs an LAA, it becomes a contract with a single tier or county council as accountable bodies' (Audit Commission 2009, Main Report para 22); (b) recognised nonetheless that partnerships differ from the traditional institutional or organisational linkage between control of resource and accountability, 'Local Strategic Partnerships do not control local public service resources; they have to influence partners' mainstream spending and activity' (Audit Commission 2009, Main Report para 11), and that 'partners must be accountable to one another and to the public' (Audit Commission 2009, Main Report para 6); but (c) it also takes cognisance of traditionally recognised patterns that 'the layered approach to partnership governance and management recognises that partners have their own governance arrangements and stakeholders' (Audit Commission 2009, Main Report para 117).

A consistent theme which emerged from the research was that there were asymmetrical relationships in co-governance with state actors playing a dominant role. The most dominant state actors were in fact local authorities and health organisations given their relatively larger budgets and importance in policy areas such as social cohesion. This was further entrenched by regulation, but importantly was underpinned by extant traditional bureaucratic structures and processes – particularly related to accountability for performance and fiscal prudence towards the central bodies and the political leadership in the form of vertical accountability.

Discussion

The research sought to explore the governance thesis by answering the calls of scholars for more research of governance, networks, partnership and co-governance (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; Bovaird, 2007; Carmel and Harlock, 2008), particularly of a phenomenological/ qualitative nature (see Andrews, Boyne and Enticott, 2006). Indeed the literature review for this paper provided rich descriptive studies of co-governance, and other evaluative studies exploring the impact of co-governance on non-state actors. Seldom was there a questioning of the extant governance paradigm – the exceptions being Stoker (2004); Kelly (2006), Agranoff and McGuire (2001) and Bell and Hindmoor (2009). In fact Agranoff and McGuire (2001:1416) argue that there is a need for a more explicit understanding of intergovernmental and network management as an important step to theoretical approaches to policy making, administration and management. Our research has attempted to explore the governance at local government level in four testable theses. We found that within two polities, none of the four theses of governance held true. The only aspect of governance which appeared to resonate in the case studies was the game-like interactions amongst state and non-state actors.

Why then has the governance thesis become pervasive and gained traction in scholarly works and normative prescriptions in policies? The answer is twofold. Firstly, there is observable evidence of a 'differentiated polity' that state actors are engaged in networks with various other actors in policy decision making and the delivery of services. However, previous research in this area has not delved into the inner workings of co-governance through case study analysis nor explored the complex nuances of these networks. Secondly, partnerships and co-governance as part of a post new public management paradigm offers a palatable new form of government. Giddens (1998) in fact argued that networks provide a more efficient and democratically responsive alternative to either markets or hierarchy. Thus, governance permeated policy in the UK and elsewhere where good governance became synonymous with the integration of networks of state and non-state actors in policy decisions and service delivery (see World Bank, 2010).

Yet research by Stoker (2004) Kelly (2006), Agranoff and McGuire (2001) and Bell and Hindmoor (2009) questions, qualifies and in some cases rejects, the governance thesis. For example, Bell and Hindmoor (2009:150) '…reject the notion that governments have lost their capacity to govern and argue instead that governance is about government seeking to govern better rather than seeking to govern less.' They argue that while governments are indeed now more likely to forge new relationships with a larger range of non-state actors, government nevertheless remain the central players in governance relationships. The case study analysis for this research certainly supports the latter argument and that of others (Kelly, 2006; Grix and Phillpot, 2011) highlighting asymmetries in co-governance with state actors playing a central role in networks and partnerships. Indeed, Stoker (2004) argues that the state retains the power to coerce and control despite the development of partnerships and co-governance.

The research for this paper revealed the pervasiveness of public bureaucracies within the asymmetries of co-governance. The research supports claims by Agranoff (2006) that networks and partnerships alter the boundaries of the state in marginal ways and they do not appear to be replacing public bureaucracies in any way. Furthermore, Agranoff (2006:62) argues that there are those, for example Rhodes (1997), who believe that collaborative structures such as networks are pushing out the traditional role of government to include a host of non-governmental decision makers, but Agranoff rejects these claims that networks are replacing hierarchies. Agranoff (2006) goes onto argue that in policy decisions, public organisations are ultimately responsible with much of service delivery still taking place through public agencies. Thus, he argues that government is core with the ability to inject

legislative, regulatory and financial considerations into the network – government still remains the power broker (ibid). Should we reject the governance thesis? Arguably, it is questionable with some research challenging aspects of this thesis. While there are clearly observable networks, these networks are limited. Although there is a shared purpose, the exchange of resources and interdependences are marginal. In the case studies there were high levels of commitment which facilitated internal identity and cohesion. Leadership and commitment, including that of elected politicians, was identified as a driver to co-governance in the case studies. This finding is consistent with other literature in the field (see Agranoff, 2001). There was a mutual obligation and internal accountability against a background of vertical accountability. It could be argued that this existence of multi-faceted accountabilities points to government 'steering' networks through various policy instruments. It is within this area of accountability that the thesis of governance is contestable. The research revealed the pervasiveness of public bureaucracy and vertical accountability. Bell and Hindmoor (2009) argue that hierarchy has been supplemented, although not replaced, by governance through markets and associations with interest groups and community engagement. Furthermore, the involvement of a wider range of actors in the process of governing has not been at the expense of the pivotal role played by governments (ibid). They argue that governments have chosen new modes of governing whilst retaining its pre-eminent position (ibid). Thus governments have extended hierarchical control and enhanced its capacity to achieve its policy goals (ibid).

The research suggested that in case studies in two different UK localities and polities, state actors retained a pre-eminent position and had expanded their influence through networks, facilitated by policy instruments to enhance their capacity to achieve policy goals of the centre. Moreover, the collaborative arrangements were strongest in service planning among state actors (e.g. local council and NHS; council and central government agency). In addition, non-state actors involved in co-governance tended to be professionalised organisations (see Johnson and Osborne, 2003; Kelly, 2007; Carmel and Harlock, 2008) often with comparable structures to those of state actors. Arguably, public bureaucracies have not been replaced or marginalised but have assumed a new mode of state authority.

We suggest this new mode is focused at the level of institutional structures, termed meta-bureaucracy where state and non-state actors through bureaucratic structures achieve policy goals, but that the state through policy asymmetries maintains a powerful role. The case study analysis supports Anderson's (2004:7) argument that:

> Many researchers have claimed that the restructuring of governance is a general retreat *of government and the state…yet there is no reason to assu*me that the rise of governance *necessarily leads to a decline of government…the main reason for the rise in state capacity…is…the fact that the state is now able to influence hitherto non-*governmental spheres of social life through partnerships i.e. the enlargement of state competencies.

Meta-bureaucracy involves the prevalence of hierarchies of state and non-state organisations perhaps 'hidden' within partnerships and structures of governance where decision making is not necessarily negotiated among 'partners', but rather it is state actors which dominate the interaction where there are asymmetries of decision making towards the advantage of the state in achieving policy goals and fulfilling accountabilities.

Conclusion

Governance remains highly contested in the research literature. Part of this contestation is about nuances surrounding the concept. There is a downplaying of the traditional governing role of government -which the term governance has come to imply- and a playing up of the role of self regulating networks; another view claims that governance in fact extends the capacities of governments and extends the realms into which government can mobilise in its attempt to govern better; the analysis that meta-governance is used by government to maintain control over a distance often in the 'shadow of hierarchy' – with a variant of the meta-regulation school being that 'the state is no longer sovereign authority...it becomes just one participant among a pluralistic guidance system' (Jessop, 2004:71).

The case research has shown governments' roles in public policy and service delivery have not declined, but have extended through various modes of governance, i.e. networks, partnerships, co-governance and co-production. Policy instruments in England (LSPs and former LAAs) and Scotland (SOAs) have facilitated network interactions, co-governance and co-production, and thereby the authority of the state. The result is not necessarily a growth of autonomous networks and governance arrangements, but rather the extension of bureaucracy and bureaucratic controls – meta-bureaucracy. This is a function of policy instruments, regulation, financial arrangements, accountability (particularly vertical accountability), the integration of professionalised civil society organisations and resource dependencies.

Meta-bureaucracy conceptually complements the literature on governance and partnerships. Governance literature is very strong on the process aspects of governing, government and governance – e.g. role of the state in its relationships with sub state institutions, multi-level governance systems, international relations environments, relationships between states and supra-state and para-statal bodies (e.g. see Borzel and Risse 2010). Research and literature on partnerships has focused on resource dependencies and exchanges between constituent members, typologies of partnership, means of co-ordination in partnerships, relationship between representative democracy and partnerships, conditions required for effective and sustainable partnership working (e.g. Skelcher and Sullivan 2008, Klijn and Skelcher 2007 Patton 2002, Agranoff and McGuire 1999, Huxham 1996, Benson 1975). We argue that meta- bureaucracy:

- Is a valuable concept to analyse bureaucratic structures, institutions and organisations of governance networks or partnerships;

- Involves organisational interactions within networks to attain policy goals and ensures vertical accountabilities for performance and resource use; and

- Indicates public bureaucratic structures are not being replaced, but remain pre-eminent in the achievement of policy goals.

There is likely to be an active research agenda on meta-bureaucracy given contemporary policy agendas. The 'Big Society' and localisation ambitions of the UK coalition government aim to see more public service delivery undertaken at sub state level by non state actors, including third sector and local communities, often in partnership with state bodies. How bureaucratic capacity and capability of both state and non state bodies can address such a policy environment is a moot point; research and evidence gathering will be vital. There are a range of other researchable areas of pertinence to meta-bureaucracy especially in an era of financial austerity. For instance, what will be the extent of bureaucratic consolidation? Within partnerships, will individual state bureaucracies pursue strategies to preserve their own

position against other state as well as non-state actors? Will contractualisation, commissioning and localising of government funded services give greater independence and capability to contractors and non state bodies or, rather, consolidate power and resource to central state structures? Will game-like behaviour increase with associated transaction costs? These and other research questions should provide a lively research field to increase our understanding of meta-bureaucracy.

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