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**THE NEW REGIONAL AGENDA IN THE UK:  
CHANGING ROLES, STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS OF REGIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper outlines and evaluates the recent changes that have taken place in the planning, development and management of the regions of the UK. In particular, it considers the case of the English Regional Development Agencies. In presenting the analysis the paper draws upon the results of a monitoring project that is tracking the evolution and structure of regional development agencies in the UK.

Following the introduction, the paper considers the structure and distinguishing characteristics of regional development agencies in general. This review is utilised in the following section, which reports on the progress of the new and revitalised regional agencies and assesses their progress against a checklist of criteria. A final section offers some initial judgements on the overall progress of the UK regional 'project' and looks to the future.

## INTRODUCTION

Until a few months ago the United Kingdom could justifiably be described as the most centralised major nation in the European Union. However, since 1<sup>st</sup> April 1999 a number of changes have taken place that, at least superficially, have introduced a significant degree of devolution. These changes include the devolution of various powers, which were previously held and discharged by London-based central government, to directly elected bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; the establishment of appointed Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and voluntary regional chambers in the English regions outwith London; and the announcement of the arrangements that will guide the process which will eventually lead to the election of an executive mayor and assembly for Greater London in May 2000 – this body will then appoint the RDA for London.

These changes are, in one sense, substantial and likely to endure. However, and as will be argued later, in another sense, they could be regarded as either fragile temporary arrangements, or as a series of ‘experiments’ that will, with the possible exception of the Scottish settlement, be subject to evaluation and further modification over the medium-term. Whilst the latter situation is not wholly satisfactory, it is not unexpected given the long history of political centralism and administrative control from London that until recently was (and, in the view of some observers, still is) evident in the UK (Kellas, 1991; Bradbury, 1997).

In the context of these institutional innovations, the changing structures, roles and functions of the various regional development organisations reflect the new apportionment of powers and resources. However, in addition to these externally-imposed changes, it is also apparent that actors in some parts of the UK have opted to use the opportunities generated by the processes of constitutional and organisational recognition as a basis for adjusting and re-invigorating existing development agencies; this is the case in Wales and Scotland. Equally, and as will be demonstrated later, in the English regions the various approaches used to establish RDAs also reflect the varying regional inheritance of agency structures and experience. Thus, what can be observed through an examination of the processes and patterns that are associated with the changing provision of regional development organisations, is the outcome of interaction between an externally-imposed model of regional development and a set of internally-generated forces and choices. This discourse between the centre and regional/local interests is similar to the ‘top-down’ – ‘bottom-up’ interface identified by Stöhr and Taylor (1981) in their model of regional planning and development.

This paper explores a number of aspects of the new regional agenda in the UK as it affects and influences the formation and operation of regional development organisations. Although emphasis is placed on the RDAs in England, the adjustments made to regional agency structures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are also mentioned. The paper draws upon evidence from a monitoring project established in 1998 to track and evaluate the progress of RDA formation (Roberts and Lloyd, 1998) and from associated research.

Following this introduction, the next section of the paper briefly considers the structure and distinguishing characteristics of the various models of regional development agency that exist; this

review is used in order to help to isolate and develop criteria that can that can be employed in judging the progress and achievements of regional agencies. The following section tracks the formation of the RDAs in England and the adjustments made to the regional agencies elsewhere in the UK; this section identifies emerging good practice and lessons that may be of value more widely. A final section offers some initial judgements of the progress made so far and speculates on likely future prospects.

## **REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS**

Although some of the characteristics and features of the present round of regional agency formation in England can be considered to be unique or unusual, such as the linkage made between the processes of regional land use planning and regional economic strategy formulation, in general terms it is possible to identify a number of common characteristics that are associated with most regional agencies. These common features can be used to help to guide the process of regional development agency formation, on the one hand, and to judge the performance of agencies once established, on the other hand.

Regional development organisations or agencies can be seen to perform three basic roles or tasks.

- regional planning;
- original development;
- regional management.

Although the primary concern of many regional organisations is regional development, in some regions a single organisation performs all three roles. It is interesting that whilst the new arrangements in England focus on the development role, the RDAs also have a part to play in the processes of regional planning and management.

The nature of the relationship between a regional organisation and other public and private bodies also varies. These variations reflect the pre-existing structure of government and the nature of the public-private relationships evident in a region and, as will be developed further later, also act as an indicator of the likely acceptability and future pathway of development of any new entrant regional player.

Considering the above points in more detail, it is evident that whilst some regional development organisations have been controlled directly by national, regional or local government, others have either operated at arm's length as a "semi-autonomous organisation operating on the regional level" (Halkier, Danson and Damborg, 1998, p14), or have been developed as a result of partnership or collaboration between the public, private and, in a limited number of cases, voluntary sectors (Geddes and Martin, 1996). The style of operation and the roles performed by regional development organisations have also varied considerably over time and between places. These variations have reflected, and continue to reflect, a number of factors including:

- the political and cultural regime evident in an individual nation or region;
- the absence or presence of other authorities, organisations and bodies in a region;

- the functions of an organisation or agency.

In addition, the operation of a regional organisation also reflects the level of support that is provided by the other stakeholders and actors in a region (Roberts and Whitney, 1991). This is especially the case in those regions that already have an established structure of development organisations and agencies.

A major difficulty that has been experienced by many regional development organisations, and especially by new entrant bodies, is persuading the other bodies present in a region to participate in the preparation of a regional development strategy and, having agreed the strategy, to co-operate in its implementation. Regional development organisations do not always command the support of all parties in a region and their position and effectiveness can be eroded or weakened as a consequence of inter-agency conflict, or if their regional development role is contested.

In general, the experience of the operation of regional development organisations in the UK has been that, at regional level, there has been either a managed succession from one agency to another, or the establishment of an interlocking structure of agencies and functions. Typically, one agency has been replaced or reinforced by another through a process of negotiation or through an imposed change that has also reallocated powers and resources. In other cases, the entry of a new organisations has resulted in the reallocation of functions and activities. At sub-regional and local level the situation is more complex and is frequently confused further due to the presence of informal arrangements regarding the division of functions and responsibilities. Matters can be further complicated as a consequence of inter-agency conflict and competition; in some cases these tensions are the result of central government policy – either by intention or through neglect – and this has sometimes been portrayed by central government as an indication of the presence of ‘healthy competition’ between agencies.

Despite the considerable variations that exist between individual English regions, a number of general problems can be seen to be associated with the present system in which a multiplicity of agencies contest both the regional strategic arena and responsibility for the design and deliver of economic development and other services (Roberts and Lloyd, 1996). At present, for example, it is possible, or even likely, that a local development agency will contest the management of an inward investment opportunity with sub-regional, regional and national agencies.

Such a system of multi-agency competition implies a considerable waste of scarce resources as a consequence of the duplication of services. It also introduces the possibility of both confusion and competitive out-bidding. It is into this arena that RDAs will be introduced in an attempt to resolve the long-standing absence of consistent and meaningful territorial management in the English regions (Roberts, 1997).

There are, of course, many existing models of regional agency that can be used to guide the structure and operation of the RDAs. In the UK case, the Regional Policy Commission (1996) made reference to the Scottish and Welsh Development Agencies during the planning of the RDAs. In addition, the English regions are replete with potential model regional agency structures, including the regional development organisations that are responsible for the

promotion and management of inward investment opportunities, a range of special development organisations established by local authority and other partners in order to help with regional or sub-regional development and, although somewhat different in structure and purpose to that of the RDAs, a number of regional development, planning and management bodies responsible for specific functions, such as the production of Regional Planning Guidance Advice or the operation of the Regional Aggregate Working Parties.

A more specific partnership model for regional development is provided by the experience of the operation of European Union Structural Funds partnerships (see Roberts and Hart, 1996; Bachtler and Turok, 1997). In addition to the existing models of regional development agency structure and operation that are evident in the English regions and elsewhere in the UK, there is also a considerable body of experience and readily-available best practice guidance concerning the operation of regional agencies elsewhere in Europe. This experience suggests that a regional development agency should:

- be concerned with indigenous and inward investment, and with enterprise stimulation;
- encompass a wide range of functions that include the key areas of regional development activity – land, labour, advice, infrastructure, finance, etc;
- be responsible for both strategic direction and more detailed implementation;
- operate through a broadly-based partnership that involves the full range of regional actors;
- work alongside other regional exercises, including land use planning, transport, environment, etc, in order to prepare and agree a regional ‘corporate plan’;
- establish and review at regular intervals the required mechanisms for the implementation and modification of policy;
- demonstrate a concern for the overall development of a region – the agency should operate to a sustainable development specification that seeks to express the balanced development of environmental, social and economic aspects in space over time.

Drawing upon the wider European experience, Halkier and Danson (1998) suggest that a ‘model’ regional development agency should comply with the following criteria:

- organisationally, it should be in a semi-autonomous position vis-à-vis the sponsoring political authority;
- strategically, it should support mainly indigenous firms by means of ‘soft’ policy measures;
- implementation should be integrated and comprehensive.

A final point that should be acknowledged, is that the characteristics and modes of operation of regional development agencies have changed over time. The pattern of change in agencies reflects the conditions, features and requirements of the broader policy environment within regional development takes place and, for example, reflects the transition from a Fordist to post-Fordist era of production. Figure 1 demonstrates some of the key changes that have taken place in the formation and operation of regional agencies over the past two or three decades. It is important to note when considering this figure, that the pace and nature of change has varied between nations and regions.

**Figure 1: Regional Development Agencies: Policies and Styles**

Feature of Characteristic	Traditional Model	New Model
Dominant Direction of Policy	Top-down	Bottom-up /Top-down
Model of Government	Centralised	Devolved
Method of Approach	State-dominated	Partnership
Organisational Paradigm	Fordist	Post-Fordist
Key Structure Objective	Maximum promotion of regional economic growth	Balanced regional development
Major Target of Policy	Large mobile manufacturing firms	Mix of size and types of firm
Policy instruments	Bureaucratic regulation, financial inducements, advisory services and general public provision	Greater autonomy, some financial assistance, advice and support service and mixed public/private/voluntary provision
Key Competitiveness Factors	Economic scale	Innovation, networking and partnership
Economic Focus	Public sector investment	Balance of public and private investment
Social Context	Low and paternalistic	Higher with emphasis on role of community
Environmental Approach	Greening in order to attract investment	Broader ideas of sustainable development and ecological modernisation

Sources: Stöhr (1989), Cappellin (1997), Halkier, Danson and Damborg (1998) and Roberts (1998)

The characteristics and features noted in the preceding paragraphs and in Figure 1, allow for the construction of a checklist that can be used both to guide and to evaluate the progress of the RDAs in England and the regional development organisations operating elsewhere in the UK. Although it would be unwise to apply this checklist in a rigid manner, that is, to prescribe a single

‘model’ solution, it is reasonable to suggest that attention should be directed to what works and why.

## **PROGRESS WITH RDA FORMATION**

The primary purpose of this section of the paper is to report the progress made to date in the formation of the RDAs in England, the adjustments made to regional agency structures elsewhere in the UK, and the outcomes and implications of these processes. Three primary sources are employed herein: the outputs of a regional agency monitoring project based at the University of Dundee (Roberts and Lloyd, 1998), the work of the Local Government Information Unit/South East Economic Development Strategy group (Dungey and Newman, 1999), and the regular surveys conducted by the Local Government Association.

For non-UK readers, this section commences with a brief summary of the origins of the current regional development agency and devolution initiative. It then outlines some of the features of the RDA formation exercises in England and, in addition, it briefly discusses some of the issues that have emerged with regard to the co-ordination of the various regional initiatives. Finally, it offers some interim conclusion about the progress achieved.

### **Origins**

The origins of the current regional project can be traced back to the work of a Labour Party Parliamentary Spokespersons Working Group established in the early 1980s. This Group reported in 1982, in the document entitled the ‘Alternative Regional Strategy’, and proposed the creation of elected regional assemblies in the English regions and elected assemblies in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. These assemblies would then appoint various development organisations, each responsible for a specific function. A central feature of the Alternative Regional Strategy’s proposal was that a regional economic development organisation should be accountable to a directly elected assembly. This position was adopted as Labour Party policy, and was reinforced during the 1980s and 1990s through a series of policy statements; the latest of which was the report of the Regional Policy Commission published in 1996. In this report it was recommended that: “regional development agencies be established separate from the (elected) regional chambers, but responsible to the chambers and acting as their executive arm in the field of economic development” (Regional Policy Commission, 1996, p33).

However, despite this longstanding commitment to, first, the establishment of elected regional assemblies (or chambers) and, second, the creation of a range of regional executive agencies that would be accountable to the elected assemblies, the reality is that what has now taken place is the reverse of this procedure. Regional Development Agencies have been established prior to the election of regional governments and these RDAs, are, accountable to central government. Thus the ‘ideal’ process has been reversed, with the consequence that the democratic deficit that has existed for many years in the English regions remains “an obstacle to the economic development of these regions” (Wiehler and Stumm, 1995, p249) and, in the view of some observers, this will continue to hinder the progress of the RDAs and the overall UK regional ‘project’.



The above observations are intended to set the scene for what follows, rather than offering an authoritative judgement on the desirability of, or prospects for, the RDAs. However, it is essential to be realistic at the outset and to recognise that what is currently taking place, at least in England, is only the first step on the long journey of devolution. Securing this acknowledgement is important, because it represents a foundation for assessing what has occurred and what is yet to be done.

### **Progress With Establishing The RDAs**

It is not intended herein to describe in detail the progress of each RDA, rather the intention is to isolate a number of key themes that reflect the challenges encountered and the successes achieved. For greater detail on these and other themes, the reader is referred to Roberts and Lloyd (1998), Dungey and Newman (1999) and Benneworth (1999).

Among the challenges encountered and the actions taken are:

- the utilisation or adoption of existing systems of joint strategic planning and working in order to allow an early start to be made on the task of developing strategy and establishing operational procedures;
- the appointment of either 'internal' or 'external' advisors in order to progress the preparation of a regional assessment and to take the first steps towards the preparation of an overall strategy and individual programmes of action;
- the extension of the various existing means of joint working in a region to the new relationship between the RDA and other (established and new) organisations in a region; this exercise is also responsible for setting priorities and building a regional strategy;
- the negotiation of agreements regarding the representation of regional views and interests, and the division of responsibility with regard to the provision of advice, services and support;
- the creation of new collaborative arrangements in recently created regions or in regions with a weak tradition of such a mode of working;
- the incorporation of a number of pre-existing functions and commitments within the portfolio of a RDA;
- the development of special arrangements with regard to specific areas of difficulty or opportunity, particular sectors of activity or industry, and individual sub-regions;
- the introduction of arrangements for liaison between the various actors and stakeholders in a region in order to ensure that a degree of conformity exists between the various strategies and plans that are prepared;
- the negotiation both within and outwith a region of agreed methods of approach to the development of a regional economic strategy and the selection of indicators that will subsequently be used to measure performance.

The following paragraphs demonstrate the complexity of each of these issues; specific reference is made to the first, second and sixth of the above points! These selected examples are illustrated by examples drawn from various regions and aspects of activity.

The utilisation of existing systems for joint strategic planning can be seen in a number of regions, and this has assisted in the creation of a sense of regional purpose and direction. The North East and West Midlands provide examples of this factor. The North East, in the view of one observer, “hit the ground running” and moved quickly to establish a clear sense of purpose regarding the formation of the RDA, the overall structure of board membership, the most suitable arrangements for co-ordination with existing bodies and organisation, and ways of maximising continuity (Roberts and Lloyd, 1998). In the case of the West Midlands, long-standing arrangements for consultation and partnership assisted in the establishment of clear and precise views on a variety of issues; this was supported by the presence of existing structures for regional strategic planning and management. This involves also establishing a basis for co-operation to address a potential risk that a RDA’s regional economic strategy and subsequent activities will be defined and operate independently of other regional policies. In order to reduce the possibility of disharmony, and to ensure the most effective use of resources, a number of regions are investigating ways of bring together the various parties who are involved in regional planning, management and development (Roberts and Lloyd, 1998). One of the most advanced of these exercises is the ‘concordat’ that has been developed by the RDA and the Regional Chamber for Yorkshire and Humberside. This agreement provides a sound basis for future collaborative working and for the incorporation of all regional-level organisations and agencies in a unified programme of regional planning and development. The most important issue still to be addressed in relation to this area of activity is: how will the RDAs orchestrate the integrated implementation of an agreed agenda related to the process of plan making and strategic choice?

In most regions independent ‘internal’ or ‘external’ advisors have been appointed in order to prepare an assessment of the strengths and weakness of a region and for operational priorities to be identified (Roberts and Lloyd, 1998). In the East Midlands, for example, this approach has helped to establish a regional view of the issues that will confront the RDA. Other regions are also conducting assessments and strategic reviews; these vary in terms of their depth and scope. A key function here will be setting priorities and strategic perspectives. Some RDAs have already made significant progress towards the establishment of a regional strategy through commissioning an assessment of existing conditions and potentials (Roberts and Lloyd, 1998). Above and beyond these assessments, RDAs will need to consider their overall style and structure of operation. Some observers have advised RDAs that it would be wise to adopt a ‘balanced portfolio’ approach to strategy with the consequence that inward investment should not automatically be considered as the top priority. Evidence from surveys of relocating companies demonstrates that once a company has relocated, it is more likely to consider relocating again (Cheshire and Gordon, 1998). Although an emphasis on securing inward investment may benefit some regions over the short-term, it is argued that it may lead to a waste of resources and damage to the regional economy over the longer term. Therefore, some of the RDAs are now considering how best to develop a strategy that allows them to support regional R&D and to nurture local businesses. This is a matter of importance for all of the RDAs, especially in those regions that in the past have shown themselves to be vulnerable to the withdrawal of inward investment.

The challenge of bringing non-RDA matters into line with RDA strategy is an issue that has been noted by many observers (Roberts and Lloyd, 1998). One approach to meeting this challenge, and thereby reducing the potential for duplication in the provision of services, is illustrated by the

proposal made by the seven London TECs for their funding to be routed through the RDA (the London Development Agency). This approach, if adopted, would help to ensure greater co-ordination and integration between RDA and non-RDA policies and could form the basis of a future amalgamation of functions. Experience in the North West demonstrates the importance of putting aside intra-regional variations of view and supporting a single body that can serve to ensure the best interests of the entire region. This has been the case in the recent past, and the work that was undertaken to pave the way for the RDA indicated that establishing a regional presence and a regional perspective is an essential pre-requisite for a successful RDA (Wilks-Hegg, 1999). This course of action is intended to ensure that there is a single umbrella partnership approach that can bring together the work of the RDA, TECs and local authorities. In a number of regions, steps have been taken to ensure the early absorption of the regional inward investment agency by the RDA. Symbolic of the importance of ensuring this transition is the appointment of the head of an inward investment agency in the North East as Chair of the RDA. In other regions parallel approaches can be observed, such as the early co-location of the East Midlands Development Company and the RDA (Roberts and Lloyd, 1998).

### **Associated Issues**

To be added to these illustrative examples of progress with the formation of the RDAs, are a number of other issues that are associated with the overall progress of the UK regional 'project'. Chief amongst these views are matters related to:

- the introduction of procedures to ensure the integration of a range of strategy exercises;
- the development and implementation of specific programmes of activity;
- the introduction of accountability and representation arrangements at regional level.

These are all important issues that must be addressed in order to ensure that the RDAs can develop without undue restriction. A common theme that is evident in the various debates on the future progress of the RDAs and the other associated initiatives, is the call for greater attention to be paid to the co-ordination of activities and the integration of policy. This desire for greater co-ordination and integration can be seen in many of the policy statements issued by central government, including the guidance given to the RDAs on the preparation of their regional economic development strategies (DETR, 1999a) and to local authorities on the future of regional planning (DETR, 1999b).

A consequence, which is of considerable interest to those involved in all aspects of regional planning, development and management, is the possibility of forging closer links than have existed in the past between the processes of planning (land-use, economic development, infrastructure, etc) and the processes of implementation. The separation of role and function that has existed in the past has disadvantaged the English regions when compared with their counterparts in many other EU member states, and even when compared with regions in Wales and Scotland which have benefited from a higher degree of 'corporate' working between departments at national level. These past weaknesses in England have led to the fragmentation of policy, the duplication

of a number of functions and, in some cases, the absence of necessary policy guidance and purpose-designed policy instruments (Roberts, 1997; Wannop, 1995).

In more specific terms, the main features of the current debate on the integration of regional functions reflect the desire of central government to encourage:

- the development of a spatial strategy for each region – this would promote a common foundation for use in all regional strategy exercises (DETR, 1999a);
- the closer integration of regional land use plans and strategic transport programmes;
- the adoption of a single pattern and map of Government Office regions (GORs);
- the preparation of regional development programmes that will be funded by the EU Structural Funds that are in accord with RES and RPG;
- the preparation by the RDAs of Regional Economic Strategies (RESs) that are also in accord with the above principles.

However, as the present author and others have argued (Roberts, 1999; Johnston, 1999; House of Commons, 1999), it is by no means certain that, despite the exhortations of central government and the presence of a considerable amount of goodwill among all regional stakeholders, the outcome will be either a single regional plan and programme, or a set of plans that coincide in their approach, emphasis and content. At present, arrangements for co-ordination are restricted to a bi-lateral relationship between Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) and regional transport programmes, and an emerging relationship between RPG and RES (Figure 2). In future, when the proposed regional planning regime has been established (DETR, 1999b), it is intended that a single regional, ‘corporate’ spatial strategy will act as a common source of guidance for all exercises (see Figure 3). In the interim, it is likely that a cat’s cradle of relationships will be established (Figure 4); this pattern of multi-lateral relationships is likely to prove to be difficult to understand and manage.

## **Figure 2      Bilateral Relationship**

## **Figure 3      A Corporate Regional Strategy**

## **Figure 4      Multilateral Relationships**

A further set of associated changes, which will influence the future progress of the RDAs, can be seen in Scotland and Wales. These changes relate to the reformulation and revitalisation of the long-established Scottish and Welsh development agencies (Scottish Enterprise and the Welsh Development Agency). As a consequence of devolution, these agencies have been required to identify new ways of working with other (elected) local authorities, non-elected public bodies, the private sector and local communities. In the case of Scotland, these experiments in the reformulation of regional agency roles and functions has formed part of the ‘community planning’ initiative. These changes in Scotland and Wales, which will greatly strengthen both the integrated planning and the delivery abilities of the regional agencies, are likely to prove to be influential in helping to shape the operation of the RDAs in England.

### **Progress to Date**

Over the past two years the pace of change in the English regions, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has been rapid, this is especially noticeable after a long period of continuous centralisation. However, the twin dangers of ‘initiative fatigue’ and promising more than can be delivered are ever-present and should be acknowledged.

Modifying and amalgamating the criteria listed in the previous section of this paper, which reflect the characteristics of an ideal model of a regional development agency, it is possible to offer an initial judgement on the progress achieved by the new RDAs in England and the revitalised regional agencies elsewhere in the UK. Three issues are considered below:

- the progress made in establishing ‘internal’ structures;
- the progress made in preparing regional economic strategies that are in accord with other regional plans and strategies;
- the progress made in the development of regional partnership structures.

On the first issue, the rate of progress has varied between regions, but generally the bringing together of the staff and functions of the pre-existing bodies (in most regions, English Partnerships, the Rural Development Commission and staff from the GOR who were responsible for regeneration) has proceeded at a reasonable pace and in accord with a defined set of purposes and a clear sense of direction. Additional specialist staff have been recruited and new procedures and methods of working have been introduced. However, in a considerable number of areas of activity, it will be some time before a final, settled approach is introduced. Furthermore, there are indications of concern with regard to the level of staff competence, and especially in relation to the level of capability to engage in the complex tasks of regional planning, development and management.

With regard to the second issue, the level of progress is more uniform in terms of the stage reached in the process. Each RDA is required to prepare and submit a regional economic strategy (RES) to the DETR in October 1999. It is expected that this strategy will conform to the overall spatial development priorities established in RPG. Although most RDAs are now well advanced in terms of the preparation of the RES, the question of conformity with RPG is much more difficult to address, especially given the variations which exist in the RPG preparation timetables. It is possible, therefore, that whilst an RES will conform to the specific structure and performance requirements specified by DETR, it may not be in accord with RPG or other strategic priorities.

The third issue relates to the operation of a RDA vis a vis other regional authorities, stakeholders and interests. Here the situation is more varied, with some regions in advance of the general level of achievement in the establishment of partnership structures. It is expected that such variations will continue as regional players continue to contest the congested regional strategic arena.

## **OVERALL JUDGEMENT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

The previous section has offered some initial views on the progress of the RDAs in England and on the re-formulation of the functions and operational structures of regional agencies elsewhere in the UK. This final section provides a judgement overall of the progress of the regional project (especially the regional development agency element) and speculates on the prospects over the next decade.

Although the regional ‘project’ implemented by the present UK Government is a diluted version of that originally envisaged, it does represent a major break with the past. This time, the project has involved the creation of elected governments in the ‘stateless nations’ of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the establishment of powerful cross-function regional agencies in the English regions. However, despite the major step taken towards the achievement of a more devolved system of government and governance, there is still a risk that the project will falter or

fail. In part this is due to the inherent weaknesses (in England) associated with the reverse devolution referred to earlier in this paper. It is also a reflection of the incomplete mandate of the RDAs, and the somewhat imprecise procedures put in place to provide accountability at regional level.

Even though the establishment of the RDAs represents a major step forward, they are only the first step on a 'long journey'. The case of Wales offers a greater degree of comfort, whilst the creation of a Scottish Parliament would appear to represent a permanent commitment to a continuous process of devolution. Northern Ireland is too difficult a case to project forward in a few words, however, the implications of the present pattern of devolution for regional development suggests a move towards the adoption of a more corporate approach to regional planning, development and management than has existed in the past.

Despite the difficulties that have been encountered, the RDAs have already made their mark on the UK policy landscape. Even if little further progress is made towards a greater degree of political devolution during the next five to ten years, the RDAs will have caused the processes of regional planning, regional development and regional management to be brought together and considered as various elements of a common approach to territorial governance. This alone is a major achievement and should provide a platform for further progress.

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