

# **Regionalisation and the rescaling of agro-food governance: case study evidence from two English regions**

## **Abstract**

Some researchers detected a new-found subsidiarity in rural policy after England's 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic, with regional and sub-regional institutions working together to implement an economic recovery strategy. While such research began to link debates on the new regionalism and the re-scaling of agro-food governance, its conception of the latter focused too narrowly on the 'turn to quality', thereby overlooking other important aspects of food relocalisation. Based on interviews conducted in England's South West and West Midlands regions, this paper examines whether the attitudes of key actors from regional and sub-regional governance institutions provided a sound basis for partnership working on the food relocalisation policies recommended in the Government's Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food. It finds different attitudes on the part of regional and sub-regional actors, with the former favouring regional foods and the latter local foods. Despite scepticism from both groups about the ability of the England Rural Development Programme (2000-2006) to promote food relocalisation,

grants were awarded to both regional and local food entrepreneurs, suggesting that the programme contributed more to food relocalisation than previously thought.

**Key words:** New regionalism; re-scaling; agro-food governance; food relocalisation;

South West and West Midlands regions; England Rural Development Programme.

**Running headline:** Regionalisation and agro-food governance

## INTRODUCTION

Recent research on rural governance in the UK has begun to engage critically with ideas of new regionalism. Despite a complaint that the focus has been much more firmly on the extra-governance aspects of the governance system, in particular local partnerships (Pemberton and Goodwin, 2010), there is now a growing body of theoretical and empirical work on the nature and implications of the changing mechanisms of state apparatus and technologies of governance as they relate to rural areas (see, for example, Cloke and Little, 1990; Goodwin et al., 2006; Goodwin, 1998; Marsden, 2004).

Attention has been given, within this work on regionalisation and rural governance, to a rescaling of policy within which there has been a re-investment in academic notions of territoriality. There is also an increasing body of work on the politics of scale and MacKinnon's (2011) recent review highlights the importance of being aware of the complexity of its construction. Thus, studies of rural governance have begun to attend to the highly contested and contingent nature of devolved power and of the local emergence of new political strategies for defining sub-national scales and territories.

One focus for the examination of the rescaling of rural governance has been the agro-food industry and, in particular, the emergence of strategies and initiatives for the re-localisation of food and the promotion of alternative food production and consumption networks. Here work on the role of local food in the economies of businesses and regions has recognised the scope and importance of sub-national initiatives, and sub-national tiers of governance. As both Marsden and Sonnino (2005) and Winter (2006) have pointed out, significant developments in regional governance in England resulted

from the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) epidemic when the Regional Development Agencies (RDA) and local authorities stepped into the policy vacuum left by the government's exclusive focus on tackling the epidemic at the expense of other policies. In exploring the rescaling of agro-food governance, existing work has tended to concentrate primarily on the institutional mechanisms and policy networks through which initiatives aimed at supporting local food have been developed. Studies have, however, also noted the importance of key individuals working within multi-level politics as well as the development of localised circuits of knowledge and action (Jessop, 2001) in the 'unfolding' of agro-food governance (Winter 2006).

This paper builds on existing studies of the links between new regionalism and food re-localisation by examining the role and attitudes of key institutional actors in the development and implementation of initiatives in support of local food. The paper draws on case studies of two contrasting English Government Office (GO) regions - the South West (SW) and West Midlands (WM) - and so responds to calls for a more fine-grained evaluation of the views and priorities of actors at the regional and sub-regional levels in the analysis of agro-food governance. The paper addresses criticisms by Winter (2006) concerning what he saw as overblown claims about food relocalisation (although his comments appear to have been directed primarily to the 'turn to quality' ( see Murdoch et al. 2000; Parrott et al. 2002)). Winter argued that a proper consideration of the rescaling of agro-food governance in the UK should put claims about food relocalisation in the context of the 'realities of the marketplace' (Winter, 2006: 736) which, for most farmers, do not manifest themselves as a 'paradigmatic shift in agriculture' (ibid.). The paper expands on Winter's (2006) conceptualisation of the concept of food relocalisation

beyond the ‘turn to quality’ and uses the review by Watts et al. (2005) to argue that food relocalisation encompasses both local foods (alternative food *networks* in Watts et al.’s terms) and regional (or ‘locality’<sup>1</sup>) foods (alternative *food networks*), the latter being a sub-set of ‘quality’ foods. The main objective, therefore, is to analyse whether the attitudes of actors from regional and local governance institutions provided a sound basis for local-regional partnership working on agro-food governance and food relocalisation once the immediate impact of the FMD crisis had passed. This interest in local-regional state relations stems from concerns raised in studies of English sub-national governance (e.g. Fuller et al. 2004; Clark, 2006), which found such relations to be less co-operative than those reported in the South West by Winter (2006). However, the following analysis is also sensitive to the argument that the regional and local scales are made and unmade by the interaction of scalar structures such as the institutions of regional governance and specific policy projects (MacKinnon, 2011). As such it will argue that, despite the discursive construction of unified sub-national agro-food policies in the wake of FMD, regional and sub-regional policy actors pursued different visions of food relocalisation that tended to favour regional and local foods respectively.

Since the research for this paper was undertaken there has been significant change in the landscape of regional governance, including the abolition (outside London) of GOs, RDAs and Regional Assemblies (RAs). In addition, many of the sub-regional agencies operating in the area of alternative or local food have disappeared. Thus in terms of the detail of specific policy measures, views and outcomes, the paper needs to be read as a reflection on a (historical) ‘moment’ in the governance of alternative food. We argue,

however, that there is value in exploring that moment, both in terms of the particular direction of local food policies at that time but also as a lens on the shifting nature of regionalisation and rural governance as it took place. Such a look back into the recent past provides a highly valuable opportunity to contextualise contemporary structures and developments in the area.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a context in the discussion of theoretical and conceptual issues surrounding the study of new regionalism and the rescaling of agro-food governance. Specifically, it examines these ideas as applied to England between the FMD epidemic and the expiry of the first England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) in 2006. Following this section, the method adopted to examine institutional actors' attitudes to regional and local foods in the SW and WM regions is outlined. This is followed by an analysis, in section three, of the perceptions of food relocalisation among key personnel from regional and local government, and from selected non-governmental organisations, and the extent to which they prioritised local and/or regional food in their policy implementation activities. Section four examines attitudes towards the ERDP, along with other grant schemes programmed at the sub-national level, and discusses the extent to which key personnel felt these were useful in promoting food relocalisation. The paper concludes by reflecting on the extent to which regional and local institutional actors pursued the same goals with reference to food relocalisation and shared similar imaginaries about the priorities for scope and direction of local food development. This, it is argued, serves to return the debate to the topic of rescaling and to broader theoretical ideas about scale and regionalisation.

## NEW REGIONALISM AND THE RESCALING OF AGRO-FOOD GOVERNANCE

Goodwin et al. (2005: 422) suggested that devolution represented one of the largest changes to the UK state since its inception. However, early predictions that England was experiencing a ‘quiet revolution of regionalism’ (Tomaney, 2002: 730) proved, in the wake of the vote against an elected RA) for the North East, premature (Harrison, 2006). With the exception of London, no English region has an RA with executive powers (Musson et al. 2005: 1403-4) and the other statutory now defunct institutions of regional governance – the GO and RDA – have been characterised as ‘translating’ central government policy into the relevant regional context (see Jones et al. 2004; Musson et al. 2005 on the role of the GOs; and Harrison, 2006 on that of RDAs), rather than developing distinct policies for their region.

Several studies have pointed out that regional governance institutions were created, at least in part, in order to gain access to and administer European Union (EU) structural and social funds (Burch and Gomez, 2002: 772; Burch et al. 2005: 470; Musson et al. 2005: 1398). Indeed, it has been argued that, in the 2000-06 spending round, combined Objective 1 and 2 expenditure made the EU the single biggest financial contributor to regional economic development in the UK (Fothergill, 2005: 661). In addition, the division of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) into two Pillars (from 2000) resulted in the creation of the 2000-2006 ERDP, which had nine regional chapters. It has been suggested that, through the ERDP, English regions not only had charge of the implementation of a significant (though still relatively small – see Ward and Lowe, 2004) element of the CAP, but that, through their ability to set regional criteria for grant awards

(Watts et al. 2009), they gained some discretion in how those grants were programmed (Clark, 2006). Moreover, Winter (2006) argued that RDAs and local authorities took leading roles in the development of strategies to implement the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA) post-FMD Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food (SSFF), making this 'the first major example of devolved responsibility in the agro-food sector' (Winter, 2006: 744).

While Winter (2006) found evidence of partnership working between the RDA and local authorities in the SW in the wake of the FMD crisis, this goes against the grain of other researchers' experiences of the link between English regional bodies and their sub-regional 'constituents'. For example, Harrison (2006: 936) found that 'by 1997, English devolution had become firmly entrenched as a question of economic governance rather than democratic realisation' (see also Burch and Gomez, 2002: 76; Jones, 2001: 1187). In effect, the new regionalism sought to de-politicise English regional economies (Gough, 2003: 31) and to assign their relative inequalities to the extent to which they created the 'right business climate for firms' (Fothergill, 2005: 661). Thus the answer to Hudson's (2005: 620) key question of who has the power to 'speak' for the English regions is, primarily, a roll-out neo-liberal UK state (Gough, 2003) (for a definition and discussion of roll-out neo-liberalism see Peck and Tickell (2002). Moreover, studies of relationships between regional and local government have found a lack of close collaboration, mainly caused by a mutual reluctance to cede power (Fuller et al. 2004: 329-32; Clark, 2006: 345). Even Winter's (2006: 741) more positive account of regional-local government

collaboration contains the telling observation that, in their response to the FMD crisis, South West local authorities were able to regain some lost policy ground over agriculture.

Despite the varying perspectives on the nature of regionalisation, reflection on the changing political structures of rural governance has led Pemberton and Goodwin (2010) to conclude that a significant rescaling of state power in rural areas is taking place. These authors detail the ‘emergence of new political forces and strategies’ following local government reform as a result of the changing institutions of the state, but stress that ‘structural changes alone are not enough to promote particular policy trajectories (and that it is) the relationship between structure and strategy that is crucial to investigate’ (Pemberton and Goodwin, 2010: 282). In seeking to understand the complexities of this relationship, there is a need to return to conceptualisations of the state and to the shifting sites, scales and spaces of state activity.

Within the varying experiences of rural policy at the regional and local levels, what is clear is that, as Goodwin et al (2005: 430) assert, devolution gave rise to a ‘complex series of differently scaled economic governance institutions operating on the ground in England’. Any attempt to understand the nature and implications of interactions between these institutions needs to recognise the broader issues concerning the operation of state power across different scales and state spaces. As political geographers such as Brenner (2004), Cox (2002) and Marston et al.(2005), have discussed, this entails a re-conceptualisation of state territoriality away from notions of fixity and permanence. Rather, state spatiality needs to be recognised as ‘a socially produced, conflictual, and

dynamically changing matrix of sociospatial interaction' (Brenner, 2004: 76). In developing ideas of the scalar organisation of state power as processual, dynamic and constantly reworked Jessop's strategic-relational approach (SRA) has been considered by political geographers to provide a framework that links specific forms of agency to the broader structuring of scale (MacKinnon, 2011). Jessop's approach has helped to show how scale and territoriality are built into the practices of state restructuring and also how the power of the state is relational and often inconsistently implemented, privileging certain interests over others. Thus new state spaces emerging from the restructuring of government will always have to be 'actively produced', rather than simply 'filled' (Brenner, 2004). As Pemberton and Goodwin (2010: 276) summarise:

“[SRA] emphasises that any substantive unity which different branches of the state possess only derives from [but can never be guaranteed through] specific political projects”.

They go on to argue, like others, that any attempt to uncover the operation of different forces through the state needs to be undertaken by means of detailed empirical studies of particular projects.

Applying these ideas here to the study of the playing out of agro-food policy across different scales and spaces of governance, our research also recognised the importance of keeping in mind that state institutions are 'peopled organisations' (Jones et al. 2004: 91) and that the relationship between state structures and state personnel is a dynamic one. A major impact of devolution was that it 'created new scenarios for the unfolding of this dynamic' (Jones et al. 2004: 93). This means that, if state actors act on different

understandings of their employers' strategies, the existence of a multi-level economic governance framework provides new spaces in which conflicts can be played out and individual agendas promoted.

The dynamic relationship between state structures and personnel is examined in this paper through a focus on devolved agro-food policy as it relates to food relocalisation<sup>2</sup>. As noted above, the paper uses research undertaken in the SW and WM GO regions to explore the extent to which the apparently common approaches to rural policy contained in the 2000-06 ERDP and the implementation of the SSFF reflected what Swyngedouw (2004a) and Jones (2008) call the representational production of rural policy<sup>3</sup>. In other words, was the unanimity expressed in the aspirational policy documents published by the regions reflected by development on the ground? Such a focus requires justification in the light of Winter's (2006) argument that food relocalisation does not reflect the 'realities of the marketplace' for most farmers. While there is undoubtedly much force to this argument, it is evident that retailing and processing activities are economically significant for at least a fifth of English farms (CRR, 2003: xv & 117). Indeed, the significance of farm-based retailing and processing is magnified in the present context because they were eligible for grants under the Rural Enterprise Scheme and Processing and Marketing Grant, as part of the ERDP (Watts et al. 2009).

It should be emphasised here that the politics of food relocalisation are more than simply a 'turn to quality'. Rather it can incorporate a range of responses broadly referred to as 'alternative'. The nature and meaning of local and/or alternative food has been the

subject of considerable attention from rural sociologists and geographers since the mid-1990s and has included work on a whole range of issues from the financial and environmental pressures on agricultural producers to the health and ethical demands of consumers (see for example, Du Puis and Goodman, 2005; Goodman and Du Puis, 2002; Kneafsey, 2010; Maye, et al., 2007). Such work has frequently drawn attention to the various definitions of 'local' or 'alternative' food and the implications of such definitions in terms of the characteristics of both production and consumption. Sonnino and Marsden (2006: 300) note the dangers of 'unreflexive localism' where assumptions are grounded on a 'fixed set of norms or imaginaries' and stress the need to build a robust approach to re-localisation. Here we assert the importance of critical examination of the notion of localism, and argue that apparently minor variations in the meanings attributed to 'local' food evoked and reflected quite significant differences in priorities and support from policy makers, farm businesses and markets.

Watts et al. (2005) categorised alternative food networks (AFN) as belonging to one of two broad types: first, alternative *food* networks, which include the 'turn to quality' and protected names schemes such as the EU's Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI); and secondly, alternative food *networks*, consisting of various kinds of short food supply chain (e.g. farm shops, farmers' markets, box schemes and delivery rounds). Watts et al. (2005) argued that AFN can be classified as weaker or stronger on the basis of their engagement with, and potential for subordination by, conventional food supply chains operating in an essentially global system. On this basis, they suggested that those food relocalisation activities using and

maintaining alternative food *networks* represent a stronger alternative to conventional food supply chains because they tend to be less dependent on them for processing, distribution and retailing.

In the present context, the importance of the distinction between these two broad types of AFN lies in the different potential of each to contribute to endogenous rural development. The EU, for example, has funded a number of projects that explore the potential for regional foods to contribute to endogenous development in economically ‘lagging’ rural regions (see Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998; 1999; 2000; Ilbery et al. 2001; 2006; Parrott et al. 2002; Sanz Cañada and Marcías Vázquez, 2005; Tregear et al. 2007). However, as Watts et al. (2005) argue, the idea that rural economic development can be generated through the production of regional foods resembles the argument that regional economic development can be generated through flexible specialisation. While there are examples of groups of specialist food producers adopting such a strategy successfully (Stassart and Whatmore, 2003; Ilbery and Maye, 2007), generating economic development by encouraging flexible specialised production for niche markets can work only under specific conditions and in some places (Lovering, 1999). Furthermore, most regional food production, as protected by PDO and PGI awards for example, is predicated on uniqueness, not flexible specialisation. Therefore, committing a number of producers in an area to one distinct food or drink product for export can be a recipe for economic vulnerability (the case of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese is instructive here – see de Roest and Menghi, 2000).

Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that there is little quantitative evidence for the contribution of alternative food *networks* to economic development. What evidence there is comes primarily from research into the local food sector<sup>4</sup>. For instance, studies in France and England found that farmers participating in the local food sector tend to operate on a relatively small scale (Battershill and Gilg, 1998; Morris and Buller, 2003) compared to their ‘conventional’ counterparts. However, Battershill and Gilg (1998) suggested that French farmers participating in *vente directe* tended to receive less in subsidy payments from the CAP, the lion’s share of which went to larger farms. *Vente directe* participants, therefore, had a ‘tendency towards modest self-reliance’ (ibid: 479). Morris and Buller (2003) found that economic considerations, particularly the lure of better prices, are an important incentive for farmers to become involved in the local food sector. More broadly, there is some evidence that established small businesses, as employers of local people and consumers of local services, give rise to a local economic multiplier effect (DEFRA, 2003; Scottish Agricultural College et al. 2005). However, against this must be set Fothergill’s (2005) conclusion that the regional economic development benefits provided by small firms are likely to be marginal, except over the very long term. Nevertheless, given the relatively large number of English farms that have diversified into food retailing and/or processing<sup>5</sup>, the potential for the local food sector to safeguard, or possibly even add, to employment in rural areas is not insignificant.

There is also evidence that England’s local food sector acts as an incubator for regional food producers (DEFRA, 2004; Watts et al. 2007), with many regional food products

originating as local food products. This is a significant relationship for two reasons. First, from an economic development perspective it makes sense to foster local and regional food sectors, as both could provide opportunities for safeguarding and creating value and employment in rural areas. Secondly, and more important in the present context, the Policy Commission on Farming and Food (2002) recommended that both sectors were worth promoting because they could help farmers to ‘reconnect’ with the rest of the food chain.

Within this context, there was a clear rationale for the devolution and rescaling of agro-food governance suggested by Winter (2006). Thus at the representational level (Jones, 2008: 380) regional policy documents in both the SW and WM expressed an intention to support the development of both local and regional food sectors, and to use appropriate regionally-programmed ERDP grants as a policy tool to do so (Ilbery et al. 2010).

However, and as noted above, it is necessary to move beyond the representational to an examination of the ‘micro-politics’ (Jones et al. 2004: 91) of this particular governance project. This is not least because other studies of the relationship between the new regionalism and food relocalisation have found that, in both the North East (Maye and Ilbery, 2007) and the South West (Marsden and Sonnino, 2005), regional-level governance bodies have tended to favour the regional over the local food sector.

#### A SURVEY OF KEY INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS

While most policies relating to the rescaling of agro-food governance, and especially food relocalisation, emanate from either the EU or the UK government, various

institutions developed strategies and implement food projects regionally and locally. Our research thus focused on the regional and sub-regional levels. As part of the research, representatives of national institutions, regional agencies and sub-regional bodies were interviewed. Table 1 lists the institutional actors with whom interviews were conducted across the SW and WM regions (and figure one shows a map of the location of these regions). The selection of interview participants was guided by the composition of the regional institutional framework (Counsell and Haughton, 2003). Participants included representatives of the three major regional institutions: the GO, the RDA and the RA. In addition, county and district-level planners, economic development officers, food links project officers and representatives of the (former) Countryside Agency, the National Farmers Union (NFU), the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), the Farm Retail Association (now part of the Farm and Retail Markets Association (FARMA)) and Local Food Works (part funded by the Soil Association) were interviewed. An element of ‘snowballing’ was used, whereby interviewees were asked to recommend other potential participants. To allow for inter-regional comparisons, semi-structured rather than unstructured qualitative interviews were undertaken. This permitted the interviewers to explore areas of particular interest while maintaining a degree of standardisation in format. Interviews generally lasted between one and two hours and took place at the respondent’s place of work. Transcripts were prepared by professional transcribers, then annotated and coded manually.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Interviews focused on five main themes:

- Definitions of food relocalisation and AFN;
- The remit of the organization with regard to the promotion of local and regional foods, and the links between the interviewees' organization and others within the region;
- Policy issues relating to food relocalisation, including the ERDP;
- Networks, clusters and rural governance;
- The impact of planning and the Regional Strategy Plan on food relocalisation.

Under each theme, a number of issues (prompts) were listed. These emerged primarily from existing literature and acted as a guide to ensure that important topics were covered, rather than a definitive set of questions that had to be worked through.

This paper focuses on the first three themes in particular. Given the important distinction drawn in the previous section between regional and 'local' foods, and thus between weaker *food* networks and stronger food *networks*, it was important to probe interviewees' understanding of food relocalisation and AFNs; this is especially the case because, in theory at least, in terms of the politics of AFN, it is local foods that are more likely to engender endogenous rural development. Likewise, despite evidence of some RDAs and local authorities working together in partnership to help reshape agri-food networks, the movement towards multi-level economic governance in England has led to institutional conflict and a tendency for individual agencies to set their own agendas. This

necessitated questions about each organisation's role in regional and local foods, inter-agency networking and the potential for duplication and conflict in the rescaling of agro-food governance in both regions. Finally, given both regions' apparent support for local and regional food sectors, and the availability of funding to promote them through the ERDP, it was important to gauge interviewees' perceptions of food localisation policies in the two regions and especially the role of specific grants under the ERDP in aiding the development of both regional and local foods. As noted above, the role and selectivity of key actors in privileging certain state strategies over others necessitates that we take seriously the interests and opinions of individuals. These issues are explored in the following two sections.

FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS FOOD RELOCALISATION

### Defining Local and Regional Food

Definitions of local and regional food raised problems for a number of interviewees in both regions, initiating similar, dismissive comments from at least one individual in each: "all food is local to somewhere" (WM) and 'aren't Cumberland sausages a local food in Cumberland?' (SW). Confusion and disagreement were prominent and in both regions there were examples of the term 'local' being applied to food products that would more correctly be labelled 'regional'. This is significant because, as noted above, local food may make a stronger contribution to endogenous rural economic development than regional food. Spatial definitions of local food focused around a 20 to 30 miles (32-48

km) radius, although planners argued that 5 miles (8 km) might be an appropriate radius for farm shops and 30 miles for farmers' markets. However, these definitions become blurred by production processes. Several interviewees noted that local food could be made and sold locally, but might contain raw materials and use packaging from national or international sources.

While there was some awareness of the 'export' potential of regional foods, it was not clear how this might be realized. Some interviewees stressed the traditional nature of production, others the quality of the raw ingredients, and yet others the fact that it was made in a particular place. These problems of defining the key characteristic(s) of regional food were summed up by a Cornish interviewee:

“...speciality tended to mean it was something of high quality, high value, produced within the region, but not necessarily using local produce....There is an issue about whether local [sic] means just processed, or produced, and I think that's important and I don't think anybody has resolved that”.

Despite differences of opinion over the definition of local and regional foods, there was consensus among both SW and WM interviewees about the link between local food and sustainability – indeed one interviewee referred to local food as an “essential tool for sustainability and food security”. For some, this sustainability was related to the potential for short food supply chains to reduce the physical distance between producer and consumer, and to provide consumers with an alternative source of food (distinct from supermarkets). For example, a Cornish respondent explained:

“I tend to think of local food as food that is produced and marketed in the same area....in terms of its sustainable benefits, the more locally, the closer to home you can produce and sell something, the more sustainable this is really”.

Others also stressed the wider social benefits that could result from increased relocalisation of food and drink markets. For them, the benefits of buying local food included: keeping money circulating locally; providing and/or safeguarding local jobs; reducing the number of large vehicle movements; reducing food packaging; and improving health through eating fresh and traceable foods. As a GO respondent put it: “In terms of local food (you’re) just trying to support local economies, local communities and local environment, trying to buy as near home as possible.”

#### Institutional Remit for the Promotion of Local and Regional Foods

The interviews demonstrated that, in both regions, the RDA had considerable influence in determining the policy agenda for local and regional foods, particularly in relation to the awarding of grant funding. In the SW, much of the RDA’s remit in relation to food was devolved to their umbrella organization South West Food and Drink (SWF&D), which also had some responsibility for the distribution of grants to, for example, local food links groups. A similar role was undertaken in the WM by Heart of England Fine Foods (HEFF), which, like SWF&D, was charged with industry development and increasing the region’s share of income from the food and farming sectors by increasing both the competitiveness of producers and the awareness of regional food among consumers. Comments made by the HEFF interviewee, suggesting that producers of local food

should ‘look outside their local markets’ to expand their business, echoed the suggestion by one SWF&D representative: ‘in order to expand, businesses are likely to want to sell into mainstream outlets’.

These views serve to demonstrate the economic focus and objectives of the RDA in both regions. In both the SW and the WM, the explicit priority was to promote and retain a high proportion of the ‘value-added’ in the production of food and drink within the region and to achieve this predominantly through existing ‘conventional’ marketing channels.

Indeed, one RDA interviewee saw his job as being:

“...really concerned with....stimulating commercial activity and getting local food producers to get to a stage where they can expand their markets and sell. If that’s in the county that’s fine, but if it’s exported that’s fine as well, I suppose even better”.

Describing the remit of the GO for the SW, this interviewee made clear that the broader benefits (in terms of social and environmental sustainability) commonly associated with local foods could only realistically be achieved as a ‘by-product’ of economic development. Hence, this interviewee saw the Government Office’s role in terms of the promotion of local food as seeking to “get more money returning back into the rural economy and the local economy in particular and the regional economy”. Another SW interviewee working at a sub-regional level commented negatively on this (as he saw it) more limited economic focus:

“I don’t think the RDA has got a very good record on sustainable development and social inclusion... When it comes to it they are defined...by very hard economic outputs of productivity and competitiveness which when you are dealing with something as complex as the local food sector, (are) just inappropriate measures to judge our work by.”

The main distinction between the goals expressed by the RDA representatives appeared to be in their specific targeting strategies. Whereas the priority for the Advantage West Midlands (AWM) representative appeared to be the promotion of high value ‘speciality’ products, the strategy of the SW RDA (SWRDA) interviewee was to concentrate on increasing the quality and marketability of mainstream ‘commodity’ products.

Nevertheless, although they focused on different areas of production, their aims were broadly similar in that they both sought to develop regional ‘brands’ by forging a link, in consumers’ minds, between the region they represent and the production of ‘high quality’ food and drink.

An alternative agenda for encouraging food relocalisation also existed in both regions, voiced mainly by the specialist food agencies and other organisations operating at the local level. Here a number of interviewees expressed much more diverse objectives in relation to local foods. While acknowledging the potential economic benefits of ‘recycling’ money locally (e.g. through farm shops and farmers’ markets), some interviewees suggested that a strong and diverse local food sector would also deliver a

broad range of social and environmental benefits. According to one respondent in the SW, promoting the relocalisation of food:

“may have some positive spin offs in terms of people, consumers becoming more aware of the need to support the link between environment and food production ... and that we also try and promote local food on the basis of all sorts of things like connection with the landscape, the connection with the community, the connection with good animal welfare, bringing all those different things together.”

Among those supporting this wider agenda, developing alternative food supply chains was a priority. Again, support for farmers’ markets and other local food distribution outlets (e.g. box schemes and direct delivery) tended to come from organizations acting at the sub-regional level. For example, local authority economic development officers in both the SW and the WM had directed EU regional development funding into local food projects, such as the production of local food directories.

The interviews indicated a schism between policy at regional and local scales. The RDA interviewees (especially from AWM) preferred to concentrate on regional and quality food and were rather dismissive of local food. This was certainly apparent in the ways in which some policy makers operating at the local level perceived the regional organisations. Thus as one Local Food Works officer argued:

“If you look at the West Midlands S2F2 [Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food] it says local and regional food and it goes into the delivery element and it goes HEFF full stop. And HEFF isn’t going to deliver them local food...they don’t

do...local supply chains, they do...big supply chains and they charge for their work”.

In contrast, some local groups claimed to have a very different agenda. This was demonstrated by a Food Links representative:

“It’s a moral issue....We are talking about *sustainable* local food systems....which is another way of expressing perhaps the networks....It is about buying from the most ‘appropriate’ source and also changing people’s purchasing habits... replacing green beans from Kenya with local seasonal produce. Our organization is looking at alternative food *networks* from the point of view of redistributing local produce within the locality, through different means....box schemes, mobile shops, picking your own” (emphasis added).

For such interviewees, food relocalisation is about local food, traceability and trust-based trading relations, developed through personal contact with producers.

The channelling of rural regeneration and development funding into the promotion of local food networks, either indirectly through food links groups or directly by local economic development officers, was apparent in both regions. Local food was seen as a vital component of wider rural regeneration, whether in the context of local employment or as a means of raising awareness of the links between diet and health. The availability of funding for these projects varied widely, with proportionately larger sums being allocated to those areas designated as EU Objective 1, EU Objective 2 or Rural

Regeneration Zones. Interviewees in both regions stressed the significance of their role in ‘signposting’ sources of funding and advice and helping producers to negotiate their way through the maze of potential funding sources. Interviewees also reported using Agenda 21 funds to set up local food initiatives. In the WM, for example, a county tourism officer talked about money, allocated from Single Regeneration Budget 5, that had found its way into projects with a local food element, while an erstwhile farmers’ market co-ordinator also made the point that local authorities provided some support for local food projects through economic regeneration and Local Agenda 21 funding. However, decisions on the targeting strategy for funding under schemes such as Agenda 21 were not taken at the local level, suggesting that only in a proportion of cases was it used to fund local food projects.

### FOOD RELOCALISATION AND POLICY TOOLS

Notwithstanding subsequent rationalisation of rural funding schemes, the way in which policy was delivered at the time of the research was criticized by interviewees in both regions. Respondents used words like ‘overlap’ and ‘duplication’ to describe the system’s failings. Nevertheless, although the delivery of funding was complex, competition for grants was strong. Often, those in local authorities whose role it was to secure a share of this funding were required to operate a ‘best fit’ strategy, whereby project objectives were ‘fitted’ to the most appropriate funding stream. There was a sense from some of the interviewees that the process was made deliberately difficult ‘in order to create jobs’.

Others felt that the use of specific ‘institutional speak’ terminology added to the divisiveness of the process.

Some interviewees complained that policy delivery was top down and that new rural governance and rescaling mechanisms were not promoting inclusivity. There appeared to be a lack of cohesion between policies and institutions with inadequate attention given to specific local circumstances. The essence of the problem was spelt out by one local food links officer when asked about whether there was cohesiveness in the objectives of food relocalisation policy strategies:

“None whatsoever, there can’t be. It’s all too big when you get to that level; it’s more than one person can hold in their head at any one time and people don’t work across departments or across organizations. So there is no joining up and if people say there is a strategy around it, I don’t believe them”.

This is clearly a key point in the examination of rescaling and links back to the theoretical issues raised earlier, particularly the need for the possible rescaling of state activity, through the politics of AFN, to be examined in terms of the actions and beliefs of specific organisations. While notions of rescaling might suggest greater flexibility at the local level in response to particular local circumstances, the impression from interviewees from a range of organisations was of inflexibility and lack of responsiveness. Again, broader economic goals were asserted leading to a fragmentation of measures in support of AFN and local food initiatives. This led to a certain frustration amongst local policy actors,

particularly where local opportunities were seemingly lost because of what were seen as much more remote policy objectives.

The problem of inclusiveness was commented on more broadly by one Local Authority Economic Development Officer as follows:

“I really think they have got it the wrong way around, they have come up with a draft plan and *now* they are asking communities what they think, big mistake, you should go to those communities with a genuinely blank piece of paper.”

*(emphasis added).*

Concerns were also expressed, particularly in the SW, about regional policy strategies that tended to ignore differences between the various parts of the region. A planning officer from West Cornwall told us:

“It’s a big bone of contention that we are part of the south west region...I mean we don’t feel we have got any more relationship with Bristol and Swindon than we have with London.”

Significantly, these concerns were related to what might be described as ‘investment’ policies, such as grant aid, and not to regulatory policies like planning, which were better coordinated, with clearer divisions of responsibility.

The ERDP contained two grant schemes relevant to rescaling and food relocalisation in particular: the Processing and Marketing Grant scheme (PMG), directed specifically at rural food producers (including farmers); and the Rural Enterprise Scheme (RES), directed at rural enterprises in general and with only two of its measures being strongly

related to food production (q.v. Ilbery et al. 2010). The view of most interviewees was that the impact of the PMG on food relocalisation was negligible. This was because the minimum spend (£70,000) was relatively high; even allowing for a 30% grant, this represented too big a financial commitment for most micro-enterprises. In contrast, the RES was regarded by interviewees in both regions as a much more ‘user-friendly’ option. Nevertheless, the level of approval was generally higher among WM interviewees than their SW counterparts, who frequently viewed the potential of the ERDP to increase the rate of food relocalisation with some scepticism. Indeed, even government interviewees were sceptical about the role of the grants in encouraging food relocalisation because the produce could just as easily be sold into conventional food supply chains. Several SW respondents expressed the view that other sources of funding (e.g. rural regeneration, LEADER+) were more useful for local food projects. One of the major advantages of these sources of funding over the ERDP measures was that many had an in-built facilitation element, whereby advice on the application process was made available, free of charge, by the body administering the scheme.

Several barriers to making a successful PMG or RES grant were identified by the interviewees. These centred on the over-complex bureaucracy associated with the process and, in particular, the complexity of the grant paperwork. One respondent described the reaction of producers:

“I think they are scared of that level of form filling and detail... they find it intimidating... Bid writing is a specialist thing and for small businesses it’s very scary”.

The Rural Economic Development Officer from Cornwall also took the view that the grant application procedures discriminate against those producers who are unfamiliar with ‘institutional speak’, leading to a climate of exclusivity and unfairness in the distribution of grants. He suggested that:

“The ones who have made the most from it are the ones who are already doing it.....I read it and it says countryside capital must be maintained and I think, ‘what does it mean?’. And it means nothing. So then when you write your bid you must use that term. They are scoring against certain criteria, and remember many of these funds have professional scorers....what they have got in mind is ‘countryside capital’ is 1 point. If you don’t mention it....no score because you have not used the trigger words.”

Reference was also made by other respondents to the excessive application costs in terms of cash and time (and the potential for ‘consultants swanning around’ to exploit producers’ lack of experience) as well as difficulties with the language needed to convince scheme administrators to award a grant. One of the strongest areas of concern related to the lack of advice and facilitation for producers outside of specific designated areas (EU Objective 1 and 2). The most popular solution put forward for resolving this issue was to increase the number of ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (see Wilson et al. 1999). Getting more people ‘on the ground’ was also seen as a way of reducing the high cost of obtaining independent advice in order to negotiate the complexities of the application process. Furthermore, it was perceived that the only way to increase the number of producers applying for PMG and RES would be a partial return to the provision of free

advice and facilitation via publicly-funded extension services. However, even if the number of PMG and RES grants had been higher, interviewees generally felt that they were unlikely to impact significantly on food relocalisation and the rescaling of agro-food governance in either region.

It was significant that interviewees felt that all grant schemes, but notably the PMG and RES, favoured regional over local foods. Success was more likely to be achieved where applications were to support specific (often existing or at least established in name) products/enterprises rather than local schemes (such as box schemes or pick your own). Thus, just as discussed above in terms of the emphasis of institutional agendas, the allocation of grants PMG and RES grants was not seen to be particularly helpful in stimulating the broader goals of alternative local food networks through contributing to more environmental and economically sustainable local schemes.

One policy area that was thought to have considerable potential to promote food relocalisation was the localised public procurement of food. This was because, in theory, public procurement has the potential to provide real economic (e.g. money circulating within the region), environmental (e.g. reducing food miles) and social (e.g. improving people's diets) benefits. Indeed, examples of such procurement were found during the research, including those by the primary care trust in Cornwall and schools in Shropshire, Somerset and Wiltshire. However, views varied about how the public procurement of food in both regions could be increased. Thus, while the interviewee from SWRDA thought that:

“We should be looking at hitting the top end of the market and then creeping our way down to the commodity end”,

the representative from Cornwall Taste of the West felt that opportunities existed in:

“...basic commodity production (e.g. fruit and vegetables) that doesn't have any value added to it...if somebody provided the right contacts and the right structure to get a lot more produce straight off the farm into these places”.

Whatever views were held about targeting strategies, it was agreed that a number of barriers had to be overcome before the public procurement of local food could become significant to the regional economy. These included: changing the attitudes of current procurement officers in large public bodies who, it was suggested, were obsessed with cost and quality criteria; finding ways through the ‘minefield’ of European procurement rules; encouraging producers to work cooperatively to help ensure a sufficient volume and continuity of supply; making producers aware of public procurement contracts; and enforcing quality assurance and traceability requirements. As many schools and hospitals no longer prepare food from raw ingredients, it was suggested that public procurement might favour locally processed foods in the first instance.

Indeed, the (now) Farm and Retail Markets Association representative saw the growth in public procurement as a stepped process, one part of which was to provide new staff and equipment in schools and hospitals so that they could make meals from raw ingredients. Overall, there was some consensus that the three main issues currently preventing large-

scale local food service provision were cost, continuity of supply and consistency of quality.

## CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this paper has been to examine issues of rescaling in the governance of agro-food in the UK. In so doing, it has explored evidence for the regionalisation of local or alternative food in the SW and WM regions. Through a detailed consideration of the policies and attitudes of key actors and agencies, the paper has contributed to the understanding of food re-localisation both theoretically and empirically. Specifically, it has sought to relate decisions made by individual policy makers on the ground to the wider directions and power relations within which regional and local actors are entangled. While there is no shortage of research on the subject of AFNs in general, there has been surprisingly little that has attempted to unpick the intricacies of power in the governance of such networks. And while the recognition that AFNs could potentially be valuable in terms of rural regeneration has led to consideration of the scope for food re-localisation within regional economic development strategies (see, for example, Marsden and Sonnino, 2005), the varied nature of regional and sub-regional responses has not been systematically interrogated. Here, encouraged by calls by, for example, Pemberton and Goodwin (2010), for the detailed investigation of the shape and form of specific projects within the terrain of state rescaling, we have investigated the nuanced and contested priorities of different organisations to try and develop a more fine-grained analysis of the scale and significance of regionalisation in the alternative food sector. Such an approach has also recognised the wider governance

debates taking place in political geography that call for the ‘disentangling’ of scalar hierarchies and a questioning of the relationship between the global and the local as conceptually pre-given (Marston et al., 2005; Swyngedouw, 2004b).

The main empirical finding to emerge from this investigation was the clear divide between the attitudes of regional and local government personnel, with the former favouring regional foods and the latter local foods, as the most appropriate means of implementing the SSFF theme of reconnecting farmers with the rest of the food chain. Thus the former RDAs, by funding the regional food groups, emphasised economic growth, competitiveness and regional speciality foods aimed primarily at ‘export’ markets. This kind of ‘offensive’ regionalism, with a focus on *food* networks, contrasted with attempts to reshape agri-food networks at the sub-regional scale, where local economic development officers saw local food as a component of rural regeneration, a kind of economic ‘leak-plugging’ (Ward and Lewis, 2002) with an emphasis on *food networks*. Few genuine regional-local partnerships in agro-food governance were mentioned by interviewees, especially in the WM. This clear division between the attitudes of regional and local institutional personnel could not have been predicted from regional policy documents and demonstrates the value of moving beyond the representational aspect of policy to an examination of the micro-politics of seemingly co-ordinated economic governance projects.

Within a general context of confusion over definitions of regional and local foods, a second important empirical finding was that, in representational terms, the ERDP – one

of the main devolved agro-food development mechanisms – was not considered useful for promoting the food relocalisation aspect of the SSFF, despite the European Commission’s view to the contrary. This finding was sobering given Clark’s (2006 p. 343) view that the ERDP was considered the most important devolved tool for encouraging multifunctional agriculture in the East Midlands region. It also suggests that Winter’s (2006: 749) claim that the implementation of the SSFF strategy was ‘the first major example of devolved responsibility in the agro-food sector’ may be overstated. The scale of policy resources devoted to regionally-programmed ERDP measures was actually relatively small (Ward and Lowe, 2004; Watts et al. 2009). Moreover, the PMG and RES were strongly biased towards agriculture and less likely to engender wider rural development benefits than LEADER+ and rural regeneration projects, where free advice was on offer (Ilbery et al. 2010).

Nevertheless, looking beyond the representational to the materiality of grants awarded under the regionally-promoted ERDP (Ilbery et al. 2010), there is some support for Winter’s (2006 : 741) finding that local authorities regained some ground in the rescaling of agro-food governance in the wake of the FMD crisis. Of the 81 PMG and food-related RES (measures 2 and 5ii) grants adopted in the SW and WM between the schemes’ inception and June 2005, 51 (60%) were for local or regional food projects. In fact, about as many grants were awarded to local as to regional food producers. Thus, despite the limited (and economically neo-liberal) understanding of food relocalisation evinced by regional government personnel in both regions, measures such as the PMG and RES did more to promote local food production than might have been predicted. However, this is

probably due more to the work of ‘street-level’ bureaucrats, employed either by local government or the regional offices of national government departments, than to representatives of England’s regional governance institutions.

The role of ‘key actors’ in the rescaling of rural governance has emerged in the literature as potentially very relevant to the development of local level initiatives. Indeed, there was evidence from our case studies of the influence of particular individuals in supporting certain local schemes in the case of alternative food networks. Overall, however, the research displayed a rather patchy picture in terms of the potential for key actors to shape the broad direction of initiatives. Many interviewees, especially at the local level, expressed a frustration with what was seen as the bureaucracy of regional agencies and the relative powerlessness of individuals on the ground. There were concerns not only that regional level agencies and actors were inevitably governed by sets of broad economic goals and targets handed down by central government but also that these goals tended to override the (often expert) knowledges of individuals working at a sub-regional level. The subsequent abolition (outside London) of England’s regional governance institutions and the Coalition government’s emphasis on localism could potentially mean a reconfiguration of power and decision making amongst individuals and agencies within the politics of alternative food networks. There is clearly scope here for further research as the new landscape of rural governance takes shape.

Despite Winter’s (2006) claim of a new found subsidiarity in rural policy, this paper has presented a mixed picture of its development in the two studied regions. Indeed,

differences of opinion emerged among institutional personnel in terms of the definition of local and regional foods and the extent of genuine regional-local partnerships in agro-food governance. Instead, they used words like ‘overlap’ and ‘duplication’ to describe the delivery of rural policy at regional and local levels. With the ERDP also being perceived as of limited benefit in promoting food relocalisation and thus the reshaping of agri-food networks, question marks must remain over the extent to which devolution and the SSFF led to a rescaling of agro-food governance at the regional level in England. In terms of the broader theoretical debates about re-scaling that have been discussed in the rural governance literature, then, it would seem that there is a need to look carefully at individual cases and not assume that genuine local level initiatives will inevitably emerge through a reconfiguration of power and decision making.

Inevitably, these assertions about re-scaling need to be seen in the light of the recent dismantling of regional governance organisations in England and the probable reduction of grants for rural and economic development. The timing of these changes has meant that some of the agencies and initiatives studied here have already become part of the history of rural governance . Clearly, however, they are not irrelevant to the present and future of rural policy making nor to food re-localisation in particular since local knowledges and working relationships may re-form in and through other institutional structures. This paper has demonstrated the need to pay attention to such detail and to interrogate broad theoretical ideas and discursive aspects of policy in the context of local circumstances. Thus there will be some interesting research to be done in exploring how

current changes to regional and rural governance will play out in the practices and priorities around food re-localisation in local spaces.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Policy Commission on Farming and Food (2002) defined ‘locality’ foods as food and drink products with strong geographical provenance. The more familiar term, regional foods, is preferred here.

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to its spatial dimension (discussed below), food relocalisation in the context of rural economic development can be defined as farmers (or other rural entrepreneurs) adding value to their (or local) primary produce by moving ‘down’ and thereby shortening the food supply chain (Renting et al. 2003).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the GO, RDA and DEFRA drew up a joint regional delivery plan to implement the SSFF in the WM (AWM, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Local food was defined by the Policy Commission on Farming and Food (2002: 43) as food that ‘comes from near the purchaser’. There is no generally agreed definition of ‘local’ in this context, but the Farm and Retail Markets Association, which certifies English farmers’ markets, uses 50-80 km radius or the nearest county boundary, depending on the market’s location (<http://www.farmersmarkets.net/certification2.htm>).

<sup>5</sup> CRR (2003) suggested that the number of farmers participating in the local food sector could be over 30,000.