Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks (RSDFs) have been prepared in each of the 8 English regions as a means of progressing sustainable development at the regional level. Promoted by central government, which has emphasised the overarching role of the Frameworks as a key reference for all regional plans, strategies and policies, their preparation and use in practice has offered scope for innovation and variety which are revealing of the relationships and tensions between various interests at the regional level.

This paper assesses the effectiveness of the Frameworks, focusing in particular on their use in practice in appraising the sustainability of other regional plans and strategies, and their role in resolving conflicts. The paper also examines their role in integrating a consistent understanding of sustainable development, and reflects on the implications for different meanings of sustainability. It draws on work commissioned by the English Regions Network from CAG Consultants and Oxford Brookes University. A central aim of the research project was to evaluate how effective RSDFs have been in providing a direction and a vision for regional activity to progress sustainable development.

CONTEXT FOR RSDFs
RSDFs reflect two key themes of the new Labour government in the UK in the late 1990s: sustainable development, and regional devolution. An understanding of this broader context is important for evaluating the effectiveness of the role of the Frameworks, and a very brief account is given here.

New regional agencies
Significant changes in regional governance were introduced by the government, with new regional agencies, structures and processes being established in the English regions. This was intended to match in some degree the devolution process under which Scotland, Wales and London had directly elected representative bodies, with varying powers, and also to respond to EU initiatives on the Europe of the regions.

The principal innovations were the establishment of regional chambers or assemblies, regional economic development agencies, and integrated central government offices in each of the regions. Sustainable development is a theme running through all these new structures. There is therefore potential for both synergy and wide divergence in the various regional agencies’ interpretations of sustainable development.

The 8 English regions (excluding London, which has its own system of directly elected Assembly and Mayor) are shown in Figure 1. These currently have non-elected regional assemblies (formerly constituted as regional chambers) which have powers to prepare regional land use and transport plans, and to scrutinise other regional agencies. The assemblies are dominated by local government interests, but also include members from social, economic and environmental partners.

The government announced further proposals to strengthen the regional dimension in its White Paper of 2002 (Cabinet Office and DTLR, 2002), and is currently undertaking referenda on establishing directly elected regional government in 3 of the English regions (North West, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber).

Existing regional strategies such as the regional land use plans (known as Regional Planning Guidance) were strengthened to take account of new themes such as sustainable development and the European conception of spatial planning (DETR, 2000a). Recently draft guidance has been issued to replace non-statutory RPGs with statutory Regional Spatial Strategies, discussed further below.

Economic powers in the new regional structures lie with the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), established in 1999 to deliver a wide range of economic development and regeneration, land acquisition and funding functions (DETR, 1997). They were also given the task of preparing Regional Economic Strategies (RES). The RESs were to be inclusive and collaborative documents, but in effect, they were prepared very quickly during...
1999 (Benneworth and Roberts, 2001). A major tension for the new RSDFs has been to engage the RDAs and influence their RESs.

A third set of agencies, the Government Offices for the Regions (GORs), were restructured as integrated government offices to correspond with the 8 standard regions and London, representing the regional arm of central government departments. Their role as direct agents of central government or as indirect co-ordinators of regional programmes has remained contentious (Baker, 2002). In addition to these new or revised agencies and strategies, many other regional groupings have formed around issues such as waste and minerals, tourism, culture, health, energy and climate change.

Within this complex of agencies and structures, there is considerable scope for conflict between their interpretation of the nature of sustainable development, and a clear need for both vertical and horizontal integration of objectives and approaches. The RSDFs were intended to provide this integration.

**Government strategy for sustainable development**

The context for regional sustainability was set by the government’s 1999 Sustainable Development Strategy *A Better Quality of Life*, which set out 4 objectives: social progress which meets the needs of everyone, effective protection of the environment, prudent use of natural resources, and maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment. The strategy also heralded the arrival of RSDFs: “at regional level in England, sustainable development will have a place in all strategic documents prepared by public bodies. In addition, the Government wishes to see high level sustainable development frameworks for each region by the end of 2000” (DETR, 1999 para.7.81).

**Government guidance on RSDFs**

Government guidance was published a year later, setting out three principal functions for the RSDFs: to set out an agreed high-level vision for promoting sustainable development at the regional level; to integrate across the range of regional activities, and to provide a framework with objectives against which other regional strategies can be appraised. The RSDFs are also to set priorities, identify gaps where a regional approach would add value, point out key challenges and conflicts, and suggest solutions. They should identify indicators and targets, set out appropriate proposals for monitoring and review, identify partnerships and other initiatives and strategies, involve a wide range of interests, and be endorsed by the regional chamber (DETR, 2000b).

**A neglected field?**

The devolution and new regional agendas have been the subject of considerable academic study (such as Jeffrey and Mawson, 2002), but there has been little written specifically on the RSDFs. Some of the explanation for this may lie in the sequence of events. The first task of the new regional agencies (the RDAs and the regional chambers/assemblies) was to publish key strategy documents, particularly the Regional Economic Strategies and the Regional Planning Guidance. These agencies and their strategies have been well-researched (such as Benneworth and Roberts, 2001 on RDAs, Marshall et al, 2002, Marshall 2003 and Haughton and Counsell, 2004 on regional planning). But in most cases, the RSDFs were completed after these strategies were adopted, with the government guidance on their preparation only published in 2000. However, the way in which the Frameworks have been prepared, and their role in practice, is potentially very revealing of the new power relations in the regions. As the RSDF process is the most novel and least formalised of all the
strategic processes, it is necessary for researchers evaluating the process to identify intermediate, qualitative outcomes rather than specific outcomes (Benneworth et al, 2002). On the other hand, the lack of prescription allows for innovation and variety which makes RSDFs a potentially instructive area for research. The “diversity and richness of the models being adopted to promote sustainable development at the regional level” is commented on by the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC, 2002).

ERN RESEARCH INTO RSDF EFFECTIVENESS

There had been little published commentary on the overall structure of the RSDFs, prior to the ERN research on which this paper is based, other than a generic in-house review by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, examining the approaches of the RSDFs to objectives, targets and indicators, monitoring, accessibility and sustainability tools (RSPB, 2002). A partial thematic assessment had also been done for the DETR (as part of a study on the Planning Response to Climate Change), focusing particularly on the treatment of climate change within the RSDFs (Wilson, 2003). Little analysis had been done on the use of the RSDFs in practice, apart from some preliminary research undertaken by the Sustainable Development Commission on the way in which RDAs viewed the RSDFs, based on interviews undertaken in late 2001 (by which time all the regions except North East had adopted an RSDF). SDC reports that “generally, these are viewed as working or work in progress documents” (SDC, 2002 para. 21).

The English Regions Network therefore perceived a need for a systematic review of the first round of RSDF preparation, with a significant focus on the views of the stakeholders who might engage in that process and use the documents in practice.

Methodology

The project brief specified that the research should:
- Compare and contrast RSDFs
- Develop a framework for monitoring and evaluation of the RSDFs
- Identify examples of good and bad practice, and the criteria for evaluation
- Draw out the findings, evidence and learning points from the various RSDFs
- Identify any gaps in practice requiring attention
- Develop recommendations for further development and improvement in the RSDFs.

The research was undertaken between August 2002 and May 2003, in four substantive stages, with the South West region being fast-tracked at the outset to test out the methodology. Stage 1 involved a review of the literature, including the government guidance on regional sustainability. The published RSDFs were reviewed, in order to identify their key objectives, and any “crunch” issues, to examine the scope and presentation adopted, their links to Sustainability Appraisal and their commitment to a review and monitoring process. Stage 2 involved structured interviews with at least 10 stakeholders from each region, to include key regional players (such as the Regional Assembly, the GOR, or the RDA); local authorities and sub-regional partnerships; issue-based organisations (such as arts groups); and one organisation representing excluded groups (such a youth or ethnic minorities). The purpose was to establish the stakeholders’ views on the extent of their involvement in the process of drafting or monitoring the RSDF, their views on its structure and content, its usefulness in resolving “crunch” issues, and whether it had influenced their own plans and strategies.

Stage 3 involved face-to-face interviews with a small group of those involved in formulating the RSDF, to find out how it was scoped and drafted, the consultation process adopted, the rolling out of action plans, and plans for monitoring its effectiveness and review. Stage 4 examined how the RSDF had actually influenced published plans and strategies, such as community plans, regional strategies or sectoral plans (such as housing or biodiversity), and whether there was explicit reference to the RSDF or any conflict between objectives.

Agencies and stakeholders in RSDF preparation

In this complex landscape of new regional activity, there has understandably been much diversity in the combination of regional interests taking responsibility for the RSDFs.

Table 1 shows the date of adoption of the RSDFs and the agencies involved in their preparation. In a number of regions, existing sustainability groups or round tables played an active role in initiating the work. Our research showed that the key regional partners had made efforts to engage and consult stakeholders in the development of the RSDFs, and to get wide buy-in with stakeholders adopting the objectives of the Framework. The sense of ownership of the RSDFs varied across the regions: in the North West, for instance, there was a high level of enthusiasm, whereas in the North East a sense of strategy fatigue, with sustainable development not being seen as a political priority in the late 1990s. The balance of regional interests is represented in the flavour of RSDFs, with the “green case” evident but not dominant – criticism has been made of the South West RSDF, for instance, that it “turned out to be a relatively weak document” (Marshall 2002 p. 26), but our interviews showed that stakeholders felt that this RSDF reflected a clear regional identity, with its emphasis on the economic and social value of the region’s landscape and environmental quality, and its strong emphasis on social inclusion.

Structure and content of the RSDFs: Objectives

The focus of this paper is on the use of the RSDFs in the Sustainability Appraisal of other regional plans and strategies, and in the identification and resolution of any conflicts, but it is necessary first to understand some of the content and structure of RSDFs. As Government guidance is indicative rather than prescriptive, the RSDFs do not all follow a similar pattern in the way they are structured, nor in the way they formulate their objectives. Some of the RSDFs explicitly adopt the set of objectives from the national sustainable development strategy; some raise regionally-specific issues (such as lack of skills), and from them develop aims and objectives; and others derive their objectives from their overall vision, and then examine the issues in achieving that.
There are strong arguments for incorporating appropriate objectives from other regional strategies and plans, and national policy documents, into the RSDFs, to avoid duplication or contradiction. This approach was taken by Yorkshire and Humber, and East of England. However, our research concluded that a danger of this approach is that it can lead to unchallenging objectives, and does not take the process of sustainable development forward. Imported objectives from other plans should be evaluated - those from other regional documents to ensure they take full account of all aspects of sustainability, and those from national ones for their degree of regional support and regional applicability.

Some regions had an unwieldy set of objectives (such as East of England, with 9 high level and 207 key objectives), while others (such as West Midlands) did not clearly state their agreed objectives. Not all RSDFs framed objectives in clear language appropriate to the audience or stakeholders, and most RSDFs failed to prioritise them, a particular problem where there were many objectives. This made it difficult to see direction and purpose. While this has to be balanced with the need for an integrated approach, it is seldom possible to make progress on all fronts, so prioritisation is important. As the primary function of the frameworks is to show how the four key components of sustainable development – social, economic, environmental and resource issues – are to be met, it might be expected that all RSDFs will show the linkages between their objectives. This was not routinely done, but Yorkshire and Humber offered a model in providing a separate chapter on each aim, and undertaking a form of consistency appraisal, bringing out the implications for each other aim.

**USE OF RSDFS IN PRACTICE**

**Use as sustainability tools**

A key role for the RSDFs was as a tool to inform decision-making at regional to local levels, via either Sustainability Appraisal of plans and strategies, or sustainability screening of projects. This paper concentrates on the use of the frameworks to appraise Regional Planning Guidance, and comments briefly on other strategies and decisions. The brief review by the SDC had found some evidence that RSDFs were being used in the development of other regional strategies, such as the economic, planning, transport, environmental and social exclusion strategies. But they pointed out the timing problems, with the frameworks only "going live" after other key strategies had been finalised. SDC considered that a key test of RSDF effectiveness would be the extent to which the RSDFs are reflected in the review process of the first RESs (SDC, 2002).

**Sustainability Appraisal of RPG and draft RSS**

Sustainability appraisal was the most widely used mechanism revealed by our research for policy integration linked to the RSDFs. As practised in the UK, sustainability appraisal is an objectives-led process, involving assessment of a plan against a set of sustainability objectives, ensuring that these are considered at all stages of the plan formulation process. This means it is necessary for the RSDFs to have clearly identifiable objectives and to be fairly detailed. As explained above, the RSDFs as documents vary considerably in their capacity to be used directly. The South East RSDF clearly sets out its objectives as a checklist against which individual projects can be assessed for their contribution to SD (Table 2 shows the objectives and associated indicators in the South East). Yorkshire and Humber include a sustainability appraisal.
methodology within the RSDF, and the South West RSDF includes a sustainability checklist, whereas East Midlands published SA guidance separately. The North West published separately an Integrated Appraisal Toolkit. Piloted on a range of plans and programmes, the toolkit aims to mainstream sustainability by helping planners, investors and decision-makers throughout the region assess the contribution of their individual work towards the regional priorities for sustainable development. It may also be used for training and regional scrutiny functions (NWRA, 2002).

Table 2: Objectives and indicators of sustainable development in the South East (SEERA et al, 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social progress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure everyone has the opportunity of a decent and affordable home</td>
<td>Homelessness and housing need; affordable homes within total housing stock; homes judged unfit/non-decent to live in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the health and well-being of the population and reduce inequalities in health</td>
<td>Death rate from coronary heart disease and stroke, cancer and accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce poverty and social exclusion and close the gap between the most disadvantaged communities and the rest</td>
<td>Children living in low income families; working age people in workless households; fuel poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate economic revival in priority regeneration areas</td>
<td>Business start-ups and survival rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise educational achievement levels across the region and develop opportunities for everyone to acquire the skills needed to find and remain in work</td>
<td>Adults with NVQ3 and above; adults with basic literacy and numeracy skills; retention of young people in education beyond minimum leaving age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce crime and the fear of crime</td>
<td>Level of crime; fear of crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and sustain vibrant communities</td>
<td>Population with access to key local services and facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage the development of, and participation in, cultural, creative and sporting activity, and a buoyant sustainable tourism sector</td>
<td>Participation in cultural, sporting and arts activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective protection of the environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve efficiency in land use through the re-use of previously developed land and existing buildings and encourage urban renaissance</td>
<td>Development on previously developed land; derelict land and empty properties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce air pollution and ensure air quality continues to improve</td>
<td>Days when air pollution is moderate or high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain and improve the water quality of the region’s rivers and coast</td>
<td>Rivers with good or fair water quality; compliance with EC Bathing Waters Directive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address the causes of climate change through reducing emissions of greenhouse gases</td>
<td>Emissions of greenhouse gases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conserve and enhance the region’s biodiversity</td>
<td>Populations of wild birds; condition of SSSIs; extent and condition of key habitats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect, enhance and encourage enjoyment of the countryside</td>
<td>Land covered by management schemes; access to and use of the countryside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce road traffic and congestion through reducing the need to travel by car and improving travel choice</td>
<td>Growth in road traffic; traffic congestion; proportion of travel by car; investment in public transport, walking and cycling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain, enhance and make accessible the historic environment and assets of the region</td>
<td>Buildings of Grade I and II at risk of decay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prudent use of natural resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieve sustainable water resources management</td>
<td>Per capita consumption of water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce the risk of flooding that would be detrimental to public well-being, the economy and the environment</td>
<td>Properties at risk of flooding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce waste generation and disposal, and achieve sustainable management of waste</td>
<td>Waste generation and method of treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase energy efficiency</td>
<td>Energy use per capita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the proportion of energy generated and consumed in the region from renewable sources</td>
<td>Installed capacity for energy production from renewable sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure high and stable levels of employment so everyone can benefit from the economic growth of the region</td>
<td>Working age people in work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustain economic growth and competitiveness, and ensure a better distribution of economic activity across the region</td>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invest to secure our future prosperity and quality of life</td>
<td>Social, R&amp;D and total investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop the knowledge economy by focusing on higher value, lower impact activities</td>
<td>Labour productivity (GVA per head for manufacturing and for whole economy); knowledge economy (in development)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Government guidance had been issued on the Sustainability Appraisal of RPG in 2000 (DETR, 2000c). Although the sequencing of RPG and the RSDFs made it seem they would be too late to play a formal role in sustainability appraisal of most RPGs (Smith and Sheate, 2001), nevertheless they did exert some influence in the various revisions of RPG. Research commissioned by the ODPM found that, for instance, an increased number of objectives relating to social progress were used in the appraisal of changes to Yorkshire and the Humber RPG (ODPM, 2002). The Yorkshire and Humber RSDF includes a whole section on Sustainability Appraisal, referenced to clearly defined and detailed objectives within the RSDF itself. It has as a result been used extensively for appraising other plans and strategies. There are differences of opinion on the outcomes of this process. The ODPM report had concluded that “based on our documentary analysis and interviews, it is probably fair to say that Sustainability Appraisal has had only a marginal effect on the policy content of RPG in Yorkshire and Humber”. It has helped to flag up, but not proved an effective way of resolving, conflicts such as between greenfield employment sites and biodiversity (ODPM, 2002).

The evidence of our interviews however is more positive: the authors of most of the RSDFs considered that use of the RSDF had helped to identify conflicts, and showed the failings of other draft strategies. The contrast in approaches and experience of Yorkshire and the Humber region and the West Midlands exemplifies the point about clear objectives. The West Midlands was the last region to prepare RPG, and therefore might have been most able to make use of the RDF: however, the RSDF objectives were not considered sufficiently specific for appraising RPG (for instance, the report of the panel into the public examination of the West Midlands RPG discusses the shortcomings of the SA, but makes no reference to the RSDF (Swain, 2002). The West Midlands RSDF was never intended to be used for sustainability appraisal, but was written in fairly general terms, in a very approachable style, for a mass audience. All the stakeholders interviewed thought it to be too general to be used for Sustainability Appraisal.

Our research has shown that developments since the publication of the RSDFs and the first round of RPG have enabled their more extensive use. The authors of the South East RSDF, for instance, firmly believed it was a framework rather than an action plan, but acknowledged that take-up of the RSDF needed to be more actively promoted to a number of important audiences; accordingly, the Regional Assembly gathered a collection of 50 case-studies of best practice and innovation at different spatial levels within the region, published in 2003 as Delivering the RSDF (SEERA, 2003). This includes as a case study its use in appraising selective reviews of the RPG, including the Regional Transport Strategy, and the draft strategies for tourism, waste, energy, and minerals. The authors believe that applying a common framework and consistent approach will help ensure that all the strategies are better integrated. Key regional agencies in the South East are in the process of agreeing a common approach to conducting SA, which can be adapted to fit the needs of individual organisations.

The system of Regional Planning Guidance is to be replaced with Regional Spatial Strategies, which will have a duty to contribute to sustainable development and to encourage better integration with other strategies (ODPM, 2003a). Doubts have already been expressed about their ability to provide this role in resolving conflicts in the interpretation of the contested concept of sustainable development (Baker, 2004), as the guidance states merely that the RSSs need to be prepared against the “essential background” of the RSDFs. Our research concludes that specific guidance on using the frameworks is generally needed: in particular, users of appraisal need to understand how the appraisal process can be used to identify conflicts, resolve them where possible, and, if not, make the necessary political choices.

**Resolving crunch issues**

At the outset of our research, it was thought that one of the way in which the effectiveness of RSDFs could be evaluated was by examining how they tackled crunch issues or conflicts between different sustainability objectives. This was seen as a key test of policy integration. The practice on the ground has shown up something different. Most of the RSDFs reviewed have identified some crunch issue but have not defined a process for resolving conflicts. The authors of the RSDF have gone further by saying that it is inappropriate at this time for the RSDF to be resolving these. A common theme is that this will happen in specific plans and strategies that will address crunch issues in particular sectors.

A crunch issue repeatedly mentioned in the fieldwork concerns airport development. None of the RSDFs had tackled this head on but it is one where economic interests, inter-regional competition, safeguarding the environment and meeting social needs seem particularly hard to balance. An example is the East Midlands Airport: the RDA was at first strongly influenced by the business case for development around the airport, but came to recognise the doubts of its partner agencies. A united approach was presented into the public inquiry into the draft RPG, and a Working Group of the Assembly set up, but negotiations are still underway. The various regional documents do not reveal the true tensions: although the airport is mentioned in the Integrated Regional Strategy (the RSDF for the East Midlands), the revised RES and the draft Revised RPG, there is more focus on its transport linkages than on the real crunch issue of allocation of land for development.

This finding is consistent with the view that inevitably there will be tensions between different regional institutions with different powers, resources, agendas and degrees of accountability, especially with respect to the provision of major development sites (Counsell and Haughton, 2003). What the RSDFs have done is not to resolve these tensions but to allow a forum for their more systematic debate.

**RSDF ROLE IN REGIONAL CONSENSUS BUILDING**

The airport issue goes to the heart of the question of the role of RSDFs: does achieving regional sustainable development require direct influence by the RSDF on other regional strategies and decisions, or does it merely require a more indirect generation of shared goals and knowledge? Some argue that this could only be achieved if the high-level vision of the RSDF informed not just the strategies but also the actions of influential and well-
resourced RDAs (for instance, Benneworth et al., 2002). A lesser expectation might be that the process of establishment of new regional forums, and the negotiations undertaken in preparing all the strategies, might have generated regional consensus about sustainability in the region. However, this consensual approach risks failing both to prioritise goals and to generate stakeholder agreement. There are problems with the language of sustainability, which can support too many diverse and conflicting meanings (including an interpretation in which economic growth is the driver for environmental protection and social justice). Sustainable development is seen by some as the province of a specialist technical community. With maximised participation came weak commitments, and a failure to acknowledge conflict. The round tables "seem to have overlooked the potential for conflict between the priorities of economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection" (Benneworth et al., 2002 p. 210). Where conflict has been experienced, the RSDF negotiations have been too divorced from the decisions and decision-makers they should influence.

Our research for ERN offers a rather different perspective: regional stakeholders were able to attribute many changes of direction or emphasis in plans to the existence of the RSDFs, and it was possible to see a greater recognition of all the dimensions of sustainable development in other strategies. The RSDFs have become more than just documents – they are now a process that includes appraisals, training, action planning and monitoring, and partnership working. In this, they have made their mark. All the RSDFs were being reviewed or were about to be, which suggested that they had not been sidelined or forgotten, and were still deemed important enough to demand resources and time from regional stakeholders. They do have a role, and possibly a key integrating role, as one of the suite of strategies and plans that are shaping the regional agenda.

There are different models for integrating sustainability in other regional plans. The East Midlands embedded its RSDF in an Integrated Regional Strategy; this seemed to be the most effective at putting sustainability at the heart of other strategies, and achieved a level of recognition with other regional organisations, although (as with other regions) a more patchy recognition by sub-regional bodies. The government White Paper on the future of regional governance urged regions to do more to integrate their various strategies: it commended the East Midlands as an exemplar (Cabinet Office and DTLR, 2002) and recommended all regions prepare an integrated strategy. This model is being taken forward by South East, which has decided to update its RSDF as an IRS (SEERA, 2004). As with the original, it proposes that the objectives and indicators should be as the mechanism for joining up and integrating other strategies, and provides detailed advice on how to use the IRS in SA.

However, our study showed that there are other satisfactory models, and maintaining separation between strategies may help to throw up conflicts rather than wrapping them up in overly-broad sentiments. There was some dispute amongst stakeholders we interviewed about the real role of RSDFs, some arguing that they were mainly about process and others that performance management was more important. Their role in addressing the crunch issues which cut across the main regional plans and strategies – such as major infrastructure provision - is important, but requires more attention to the process for resolving conflicts and meeting all sustainable development objectives.

THE FUTURE

Our research has shown that RSDFs have made a difference, but in the field of consensus-building rather than practical outcomes. What is the future of the RSDF experiment, and what are the future challenges for RSDFs?

These challenges include the wider "external" political context at the European and national level. Mixed messages are coming from Europe: preparation is under way on the revised European Spatial Development Strategy (ESDP2), which is likely to influence the new round of English RSSs, but with significant reductions to European funding regimes (such as the Structural Funds) consequent on the accession of 10 new member states in 2004. Domestically, the separation of functions within central government is always a challenge for integration: regional policy and sustainable development functions rest with 3 government departments (ODPM, the Department for Trade and Industry, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), which risks continued dislocation of responsibility for the oversight of RSDF, RPG and RES preparation. Other central government departments such as those for education and culture are only partially engaged at the regional level. Within the regions themselves, there are issues of the length of the transition arrangements to new elected regional assemblies; their formalisation via legislation, allocation of budgets and gain of citizen legitimacy are still a long way off. In other strategy areas such as community strategies, issues of educating and engaging the wider set of stakeholders remain (Kidd, 2002).

Serious disparities remain between the English regions: while the government is ostensibly committed to a form of regional policy to reduce these disparities, and the Treasury aims to reduce the persistent gap in growth rates between the regions, this does not directly reduce absolute disparities (Adams, Robinson and Vigor, 2003). A much wider range of policy initiatives - such as in employment levels, enterprise, innovation, skills and public investment – need implementing, with regional-proofing of all government spending decisions. Major developments and spending programmes have been initiated by the government in providing sites for more housing which cut across regional boundaries (ODPM, 2003b), and both the regions and local authorities have had to respond to rather than lead this process. Proposals for major housing growth at Milton Keynes, Cambridge-Stansted, Ashford in Kent and Thames Gateway (in East of England, South East and London) have not been subject to sustainability appraisal based on the RSDFs. Moreover, major infrastructure schemes such as further airport development have been promoted by central government in the airports white paper, which proposes the expansion of passenger and freight capacity at East Midlands Airport subject to stringent controls on noise impacts, with the case for a new runway kept under review (DfT, 2003). The RSDF and sustainability appraisal processes, it seems, can be sidelined by central government when it suits its purpose.

An alternative view is more optimistic. While RSDFs have no resources as such, it is possible that if endorsed by an elected regional
assembly, they will gain legitimacy, and could be used further in the scrutiny role critically to evaluate the outcomes of RDAs and their strategies. SDC also concluded (SDC, 2002) that RSDFs should continue to be promoted at a regional level, through a combination of the leadership (championing sustainable development) and scrutiny (holding other players to account) roles. They urge that their importance as strategic documents is also recognised in other central government guidance and funding (such as the appraisal system used by government for awarding RDA single pot funding).

CONCLUSION

Our research concluded that future RSDFs need to be different from the first round. RSDFs of whatever form will need to be smarter with respect to the greater sophistication and complexity of work being undertaken at the regional level. They will need greater legitimacy through structured and representative stakeholder involvement in their review, and in the formulation of objectives and targets. This requires some development of skills in the regions on stakeholder involvement, which has greater force given the non-statutory status of RSDFs and the non-elected status of regional assemblies. The objectives of the RSDFs need to be better defined and especially prioritised in order to increase their usefulness in the sustainability appraisal of other plans and strategies. Action plans, while not a formal requirement, would set out clear responsibilities and tasks against time-scales, and would assist Regional Assemblies in their scrutiny function particularly of RDAs. Voluntary agreements with other partners and stakeholders would allow for more effective implementation of these action plans, and more effective monitoring. There may be a case for targeted documents to show the relevance of RSDFs to certain specialist sectors and audiences.

These recommendations are all related to process issues. But the principal aim of RSDFs was to further sustainable development within the regions. Sustainable development is a highly contested concept, and it is to be welcomed that regions interpret it in different ways. But while substantive integration is occurring (such as the mainstreaming of biodiversity, social inclusion and energy conservation) within the RSDFs and within other regional strategies, if central government infrastructure funding continues not just to promote a business-led view of sustainable development, but also to ignore the existence of RSDFs, the frameworks will be seen by regional players as irrelevant. The future of RSDFs therefore remains uncertain.

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