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Sustainable Development and Institutional Design: The Example of the Mersey Basin Campaign

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ABSTRACT *The Mersey Basin Campaign was established in 1985 in the North West of England to address continuing problems of water quality and associated landward dereliction of the River Mersey and its tributaries. The Campaign's premise that water quality should be improved both for its own sake and as a stimulus to regeneration has proved to be well founded and has subsequently been extended to embrace community action to help nurture watercourse improvement and care. The Campaign can now be seen as a model for engaging co-ordinated environmental action through a partnership approach. This paper explores the nature of the Mersey Basin Campaign as an example of the new structures which are being developed in order to help deliver the new environmental policy agenda. It is argued that the Campaign stands as a model for what will become an increasing need to develop focused environmental planning and management at the sub-regional and regional scales.*

Introduction

The establishment of the Mersey Basin Campaign in 1985 broke new ground in British administrative practice in a uniquely collaborative venture founded on the personal initiative of a government minister, Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment. The rationale behind the Campaign was straightforward: that the twin problems of poor water quality and industrial dereliction were intimately connected and should be addressed as such; and that a nominally independent body based on partnership was the best means of reconciling disparate interests. The objective was set out clearly:

To rebuild the urban areas of the North West we need to clean and clear the ravages of the past, to recreate the opportunities that attracted earlier generations to come and live there and invest there. The great challenge is now the Mersey and its tributaries. From its source well to the east of Manchester to the sea beyond Liverpool we must aim for much cleaner water. This objective, which will provide an incentive for the location of industry that needs clean water, gives purpose to the restoration of the banks and the riverside. It encourages the restoration to full use and beauty of the many waterside places neglected over the

years. A Mersey Basin restored to a quality of environmental standards fit for the end of this century will be of incalculable significance in the creation of new employment . . . I can think of no more exciting challenge for the decades ahead. (Michael Heseltine, Department of the Environment, 1982, pp. 1–2).

The new body was designed in part to be a conduit for European and central government funding for urban regeneration and this inevitably construed it as an arm of the Government Office for the North West. However, since the Campaign's initiation, there have been three fundamental developments: a broadening of the Campaign's remit to embrace the promotion of community care for waterways; increased independence from the Government Office for the North West through the allocation of grant-in-aid; and the emergence of the agenda of sustainable development which is increasingly providing a rationale for the Campaign's activities.

This paper considers the Mersey Basin Campaign as an example of the way in which institutions are being developed and redesigned to not only meet the challenges prompted by the emergence of new policy agendas such as sustainable development, but also as a means of articulating popular aspirations for greater control over the quality of their living, working and leisure environments.

Organizational Implications of Sustainable Development

The agenda of sustainable development is presenting a formidable challenge to established institutional mechanisms for the delivery of policies and programmes at all levels of government. The rise of the new environmentalism has been well documented, as has the place of sustainability as a new focus of public policy (Healey & Shaw, 1993; Bishop, 1996). The delivery of such aspirations demands innovative mechanisms for environmental management. The establishment of a regional and sub-regional perspective to environmental policy and planning has recently been strengthened in the North West Region of England by the publication of Regional Planning Guidance 13 (Government Office for the North West/Government Office for Merseyside, 1996) which engages with the principles of sustainability with the intention that they cascade down into local policy. Equally, the need for closer integration of economic, social and environmental concerns is highlighted with the recognition of the importance of the individuals within communities, or clusters of common interest. This, in turn, prompts the need for attention to what kinds of institutional structures are best able to accommodate diverse and locally centred aspirations whilst paying heed to the demands of the broader picture.

There is an emerging consensus as to the features for new arrangements. First, there is general recognition of the need to adopt a more cross-sectoral approach linking previously unrelated areas of policy and action. Second, it is considered that new structures should facilitate co-operation and co-ordination both within the public sector, and between the public and private sectors and local communities. Third, they should encourage and build upon local initiatives and community involvement (Commission of the European Communities, 1992; Blowers, 1993). These principles reflect the complexity of the challenges facing

environmental policy makers and the increasingly articulate and forceful demands for greater individual and community involvement in the determination of environmental policy.

Changing Attitudes Towards Governance

The nature of our understanding of the way in which we both perceive and wish to manage our environment has undergone radical change over the past two decades. This is particularly exposed in the theory and practice of spatial planning which is increasingly viewed as a medium for the expression of community-led aspirations for particular environmental futures and not merely the vehicle for policy determined and implemented in a top-down fashion. This change is finding expression in the institutionalist approach to understanding social and environmental management (Rydin, 1993; Healey, 1997, 1998) which "focuses on the social relations through which daily life is conducted, and the way social and biospheric relations interweave", in particular emphasizing "the range of stakes which people have in local environments, and the diversity of ways we have of asserting claims for policy attention" (Healey, 1997, p. 5).

In parallel to notions of the need for institutional innovation prompted by sustainable development, interest in institutional reform has also emerged in other arenas. The last 30 years have also witnessed a profound shift in thinking in relation to governance generally witnessed by the move from state control through public service delivery to its devolution to the private sector and most recently the evolution of local policy ownership. Healey (1997) suggests three models which could form the basis of an interpretative framework for understanding the evolving demands for democratic frameworks: the *criteria driven approach* which emphasizes policy measures, and *entrepreneurial consensus* and *participatory approaches* which address demands for more active involvement by "opening up government processes to enable a more continuous interaction between government, business and citizens" (ibid., p. 239).

The sustainability agenda, new forms of governance and the demands for greater community involvement in the decision-making process require novel institutional mechanisms which are able to address a diversity of interests within a new environmental context. The field of environmental planning is beginning to inform our understanding of how these new mechanisms might be devised and put in place.

Institutional Design for Sustainability

Healey (1997, pp. 288–289) sets out five parameters which should be satisfied in the design of participative and democratic governance which are equally fundamental to a sustainable development perspective. These are to:

- recognize the range and variety of stakeholders concerned with local environmental quality, their character and interrelationships;
- spread power from formal agencies of government;
- provide a framework for informal intervention and local initiatives, encouraging diversity;
- foster inclusion of all members of the community, recognizing diversity;
- be continually and openly accountable.

This framework provides a basis for the analysis of innovative forms of organization which are emerging in environmental planning and management, many of which address popular aspirations for local involvement. The design process is envisaged as having two interacting levels: first, work undertaken by stakeholder communities in building “social, intellectual and political capital in the course of developing strategies to address their collective concerns in the management of local environmental change”; and second, the “design of the political, administrative and legal systems which structure the context of local instances” (ibid., p. 286).

A recent review of strategic environmental initiatives in the North West of England (Kidd *et al.*, 1996) revealed a tremendous diversity of activity which has built up over the last 25 years. Some 120 initiatives were identified, embracing a broad array of origination, structure, scale and purpose, displaying a unique record of innovation. One of these initiatives, the Mersey Basin Campaign, in particular merits special review as a practical illustration of the translation of these ideas into practice.

The Example of the Mersey Basin Campaign

Campaign Objectives

The Mersey Basin Campaign is a 25-year initiative to clean up the rivers, canals and estuary of the Mersey Basin and restore associated degraded land to optimum use, be this for industry, housing or amenity. Formally launched by the Department of the Environment in 1985, the Campaign covers an area of 4680 km² and embraces some 2000 km of watercourse, it is one of the largest river basin projects in the world (Figure 1). Water quality in the Mersey Basin was an early casualty of urbanization and industrialization in this heavily populated sub-region (Greenwood, 1999). At the inception of the Campaign, the rivers of the Basin were amongst the most grossly polluted in the UK, with the Mersey Estuary in particular receiving up to 60% of the mainland pollution generated by a population of over 5 million people, and a host of heavy industry along its banks. The Campaign’s objectives centre on tackling this legacy, and specifically aim:

- to improve river quality to at least “fair” standard by the year 2010 so that all rivers and streams are clean enough to support fish;
- to stimulate attractive waterside developments for business, recreation, housing, tourism and heritage; and
- to encourage people living and working in the Mersey Basin to value and cherish their watercourses and waterfront environments.

The cost of realizing such aspirations is estimated to be some £4 billion (£2.5 billion on water quality improvement and £1.5 billion on landward regeneration). The vast majority of this expenditure will come from the private sector—in the case of water quality improvements, North West Water investment in sewerage systems and sewage treatment plants; and for landward regeneration, private investors encouraged by public money invested in infrastructure and amenity improvements.

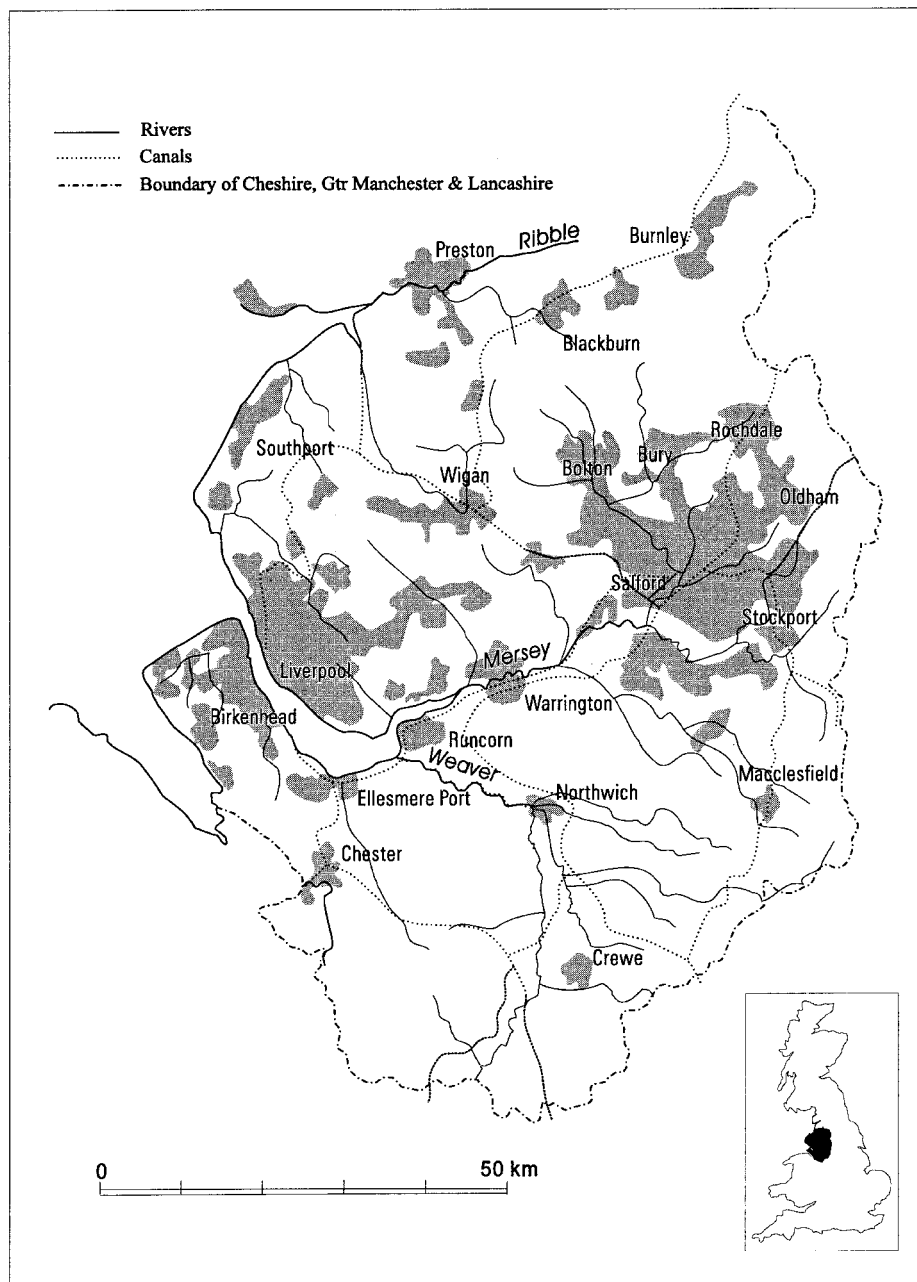


Figure 1. The Mersey Basin Campaign area.

The Mersey Basin Campaign and the New Environmental Agenda

Though conceived initially as a vehicle for realizing the synergy between environmental quality and economic development, the Campaign (through the extension of its remit to include social objectives) has come to demonstrate a coherent framework for sustainable planning and management. The ambition of the Mersey Basin Campaign to restore water quality to a standard which will

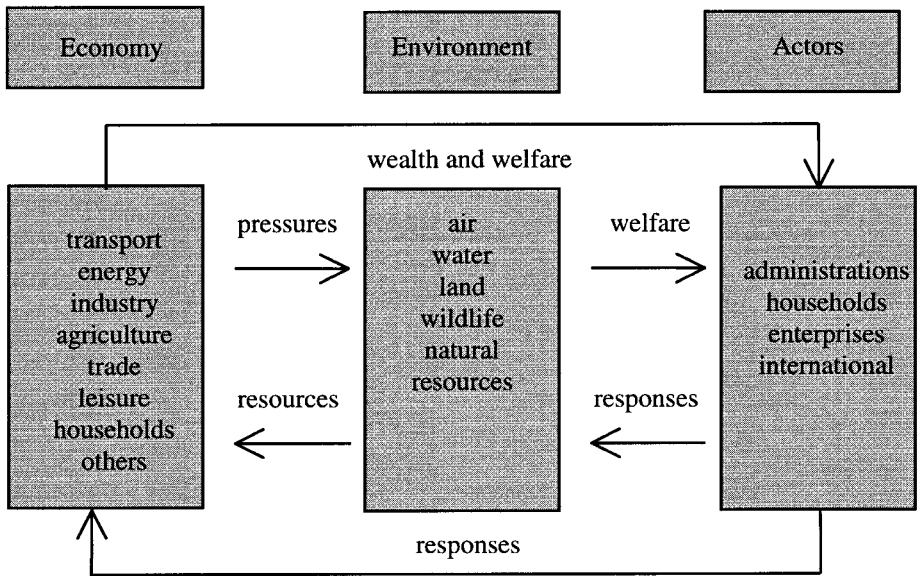


Figure 2. The model underlying the indicators of sustainable development. *Source:* HM Government (1996).

support fish life, and can be safely used for contact activities such as water-sports, explicitly defines a more sustainable future for the water environment. A useful starting point is the Biodiversity Action Plan (HM Government, 1995) which sets out the framework for the conservation of water bodies, with the restoration of degraded rivers and streams being a central element of this. The introduction of statutory Water Quality Objectives (WQOs) and integrated Catchment Management Plans (CMPs) and latterly Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs) which embrace a more holistic view of the environment and address management issues concerning air and land as well as water, under the auspices of the Environment Agency, are recommended in the Action Plan and represent the establishment of an enhanced environmental regulatory framework. The setting of benchmarks against which both current environmental quality and progress towards the sustainable management of resources such as water can be measured has most recently been developed through devising a series of indicators of sustainable development (HM Government, 1996) (Figure 2). Here, two broad aims are recognized, namely that: "renewable resources should be used sustainably", and "damage to the carrying capacity of the environment and the risk to human health and biodiversity from the effects of human activity should be minimised" (p. 7).

In relation to water, this entails the propitious use of water resources and the sustenance and improvement of water quality. Water quality indicators include:

- river quality—chemical and biological;
- nitrates in rivers and groundwater;
- phosphorus in rivers;
- pesticides in rivers and groundwater;

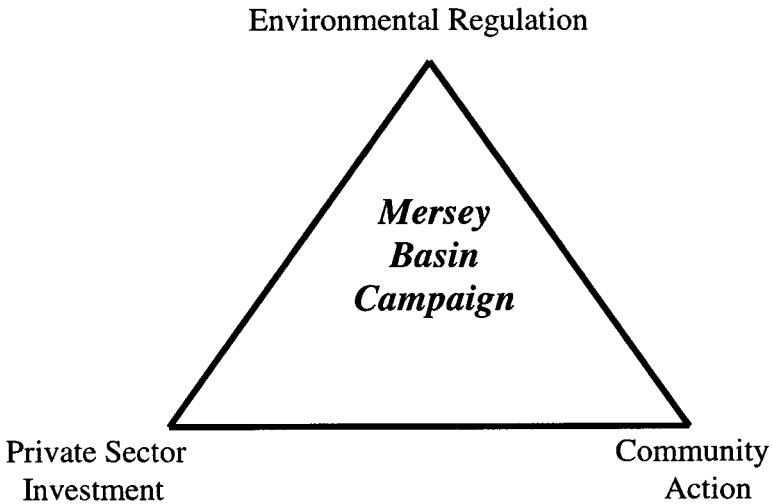


Figure 3. The Campaign's key relationships.

- pollution incidents;
- pollution prevention and control;
- expenditure on water abstraction, treatment and distribution; and
- expenditure on sewage treatment.

The imposition of a more sophisticated regulatory regime through the development of WQOs, CMPs and now LEAPs represents the establishment of a robust framework for policy and subsequent management. A sterner challenge remains in the meeting of these aspirations through both private sector investment and the stimulation of community action to take responsibility for their local watercourses. The Mersey Basin Campaign occupies common ground between these three elements (Figure 3).

A problem, however, rests with finding appropriate mechanisms for the devising and delivery of policies and programmes; the development of planning policy at the regional level represents one route, but geographically defined landscapes hold equal potential. River basin management is one such 'landscape'. The Mersey Basin forms a relatively discrete, coherent physical entity on which to focus policy and management attention.

The activities of the Mersey Basin Campaign are naturally allied to policy making at the sub-regional level, especially in terms of the improvement of water quality, linking feeder streams in the foothills of the Pennines with the rivers which eventually feed the Mersey. However, the Campaign has also proved adept at tuning in to local action at the neighbourhood level, using local authorities and other organizations working at the local level, such as Groundwork, as contact points and partners to stimulate further and more co-ordinated activity. Figure 4 illustrates the current Campaign structure.

The Mersey Basin Campaign has evolved since 1985 as a focus for co-ordinated action related to the improvement and care of watercourses within the Mersey catchment. It brings together a wide range of organizations—public, private and voluntary—all of which are individually concerned with the Campaign's objectives, and provides a framework to enable more effective collective

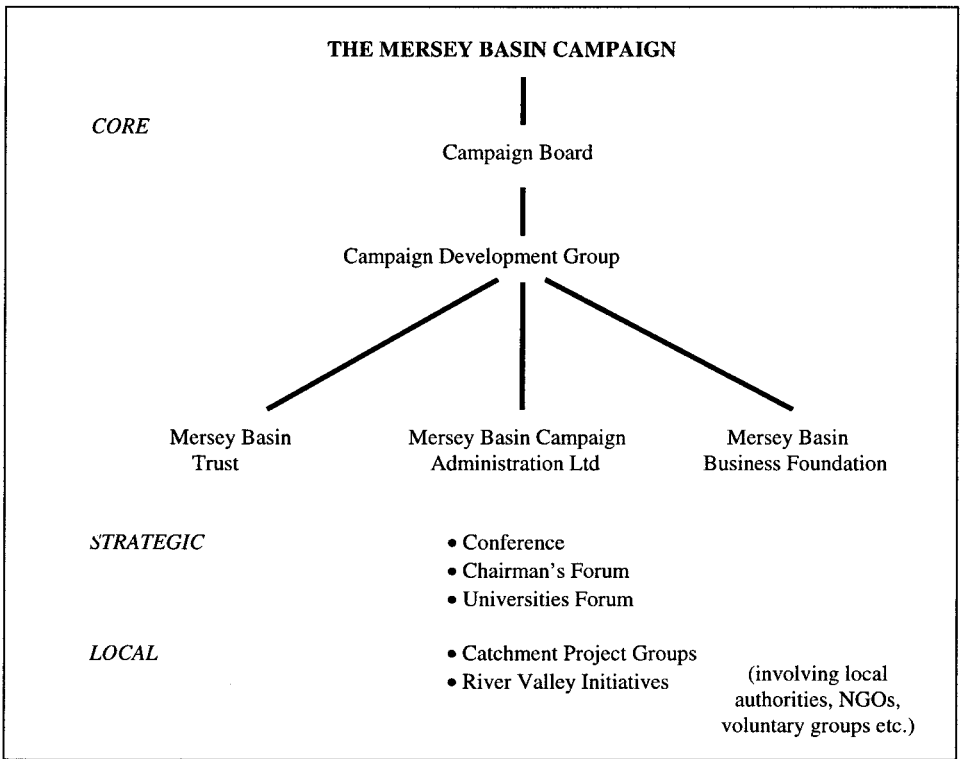


Figure 4. The Mersey Basin Campaign structure. *Source:* Wood *et al.* (1997).

working. The structure of the Campaign has been developed specifically to nurture a unique partnership between interests concerned with a cleaner environment for its own sake, as a stimulus to economic activity, and as a part of a better quality of life for all residents. At the heart of the Campaign are three core organizations: Mersey Basin Campaign Administration Ltd; the Mersey Basin Trust; and the Mersey Basin Business Foundation. Mersey Basin Campaign Administration Ltd is a subsidiary company of the Business Foundation and co-ordinates the Campaign's activities. It is a newly established company, now independent of the regional government office and is grant aided by central government. The Trust is a registered charity and co-ordinates voluntary groups in undertaking environmental action, and developing understanding and awareness through the dissemination of information about the water environment and through education. Involvement of the whole community is thus being pursued, and growth in membership of the Mersey Basin Trust reflects the burgeoning activity (Figure 5).

The Business Foundation serves as the link with the business community, acting as a conduit for sponsorship for the Campaign in general and specific themes within it. Figure 6 illustrates the seven-fold increase in sponsorship in just nine years.

All three are represented on a monthly Board under the Campaign Chairman. Such marshalling of multi-sectoral interests counters (in the water environment at least) a recent and perhaps premature criticism that, "at present, the realisation of any regional vision depends on the activities of a number of autonomous local authorities which have no statutory obligations to pursue regional objectives.

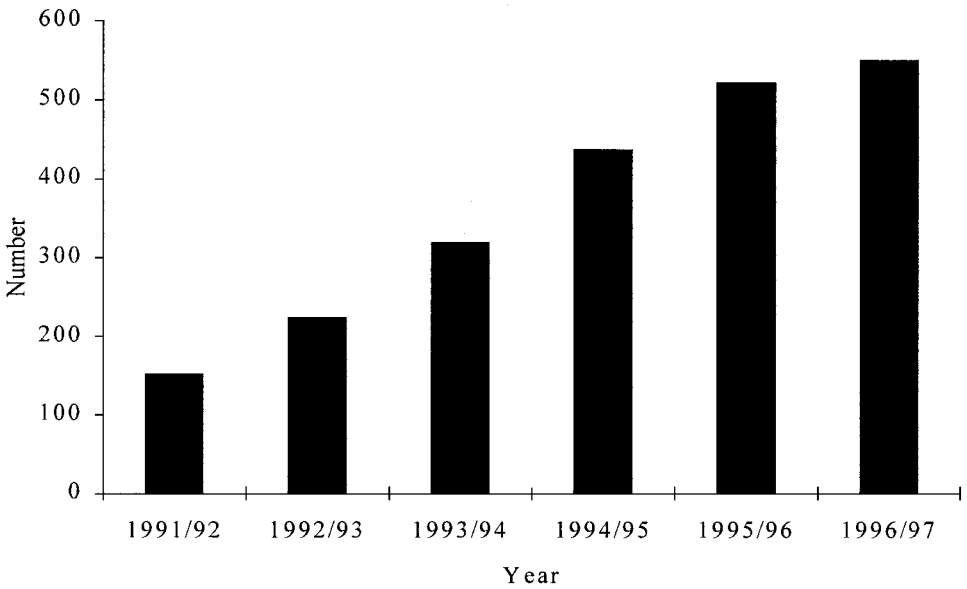


Figure 5. Mersey Basin Trust membership. *Source:* Wood *et al.* (1997).

Alongside this fragmented institutional framework, regional government offices do not currently have the resources or statutory powers to carry the vision forward" (Middleton, 1997, p. 12).

The encouragement of active citizenship as advocated by the Local Agenda 21 process accords with the spirit behind the Mersey Basin Campaign, i.e. the establishment and encouragement of local responsibility for watercourses. Local Agenda 21 has given broader credence to, and substantiated a process of, environmental care which has been long-established under the auspices of the Campaign. The breadth of this new agenda is only just becoming established and infused into popular consciousness and the particular balance between coercion and education has yet to be fully established. The educational nature of the Campaign is being complemented by statutory European Water Quality

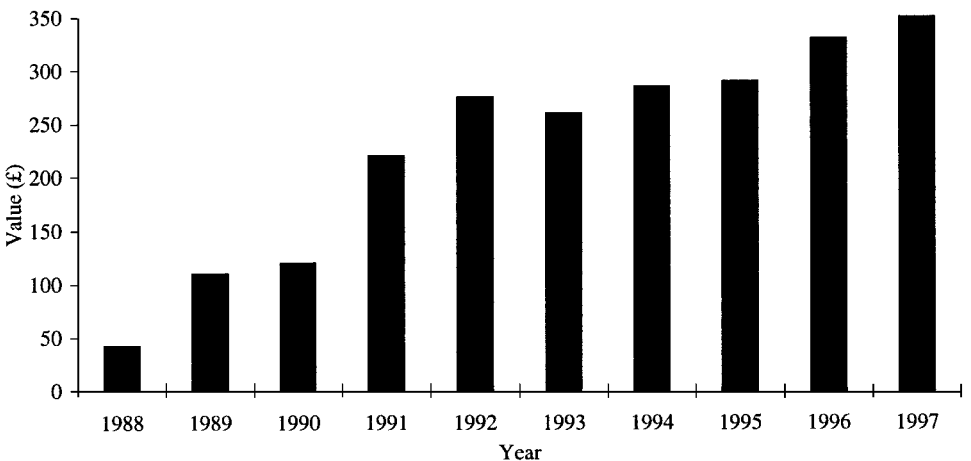


Figure 6. Mersey Basin Business Foundation: contributions in cash and other resources. *Source:* Wood *et al.* (1997).

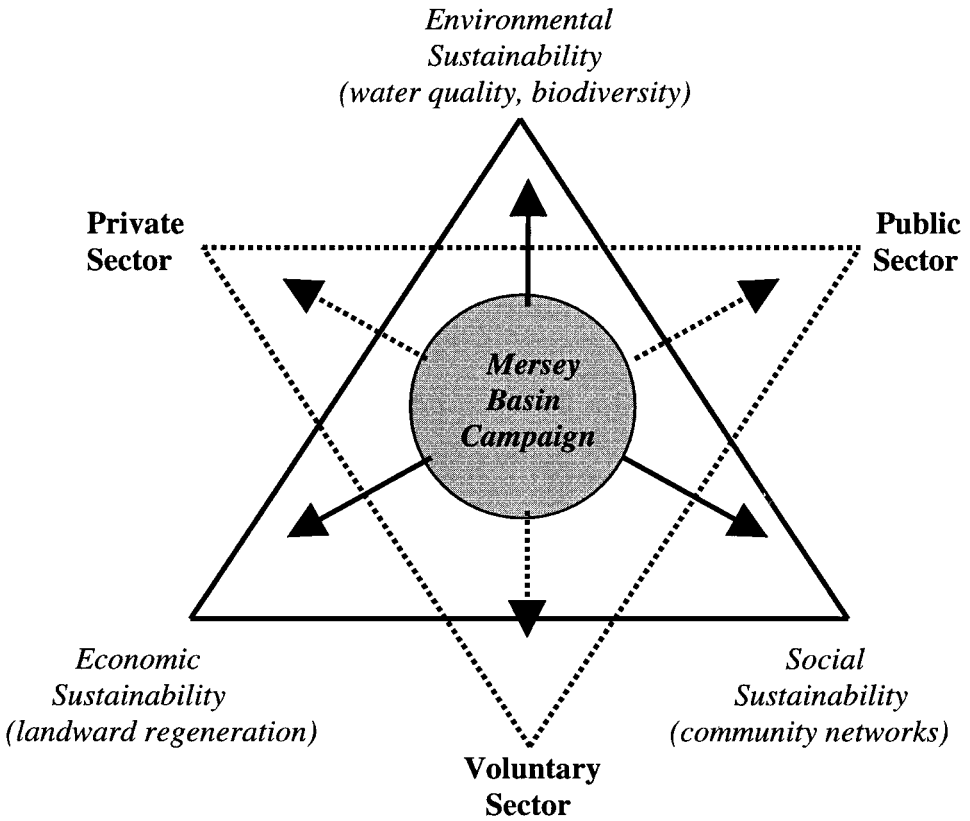


Figure 7. Sustainability and partnerships under the Mersey Basin Campaign.

Directives implemented via the Environment Agency, presaging a firmer regulatory stance in this and other areas.

It can thus be envisaged that the Campaign sits at the centre of two distinct yet complementary sets of relationships: those of sustainability and partnership. This is illustrated in Figure 7.

Placing sustainability at the heart of the rationale for the Mersey Basin Campaign represents a novel way of looking at how this often indistinct concept might be operationalized. The Campaign certainly was not constructed around this notion; rather attention is drawn here to its role as a medium for the aspirations which attend the concept, in this case as expressed through the water environment. Crucially, the Campaign also translates these aspirations through extant mechanisms, thus helping to realize what has become an abstract term with little relation to the practicalities of day-to-day environmental management. Thus, as a focal point for the meeting of the common interests of public, private and voluntary sectors, the Campaign stands as a means of adding value to existing programmes and activities by, for example, generating links between sectors that otherwise might not interact, or certainly would interact with greater difficulty. This holistic, cross-sectoral and co-operative approach is aimed at adding value to these relationships and can be conceived as part of the systemic institutional design identified by Healey (1997). To recapitulate, these are: the recognition of the diversity of stakeholders; the need to devolve power from formal government agencies; the need for a framework for the encouragement

of a diversity of local initiatives, fostering inclusion; and the recognition of the importance of accountability. A key component of the Mersey Campaign, River Valley Initiatives, is addressing the issues of inclusion and local accountability.

River Valley Initiatives

The development of a framework for informal invention, local initiative and the fostering of community involvement has steadily become a prime objective of the Mersey Basin Campaign. This is reflected in the structure of one of the key means of delivery of the Campaign's objectives: Catchment Project Groups (CPGs) and River Valley Initiatives (RVIs). Catchment Project Groups enable groups of local authorities to work together and pursue common cross-boundary interests; RVIs build on this joint working, targeting specific watercourses and using a project officer (often based in a local authority) to stimulate and maintain community involvement. RVIs form a direct link between the Campaign and the Local Environment Agency Plans with the Environment Agency represented on the steering group of each RVI. In addition to the Steering Group, each RVI can form sub-groups in order to explore specific issues such as access and recreation and publicity for water-related activity in more detail, perhaps where they present a particular problem or opportunity. Formally launched in 1993, the suite of RVIs has grown to seven with a number of others being considered.

The objectives of RVIs inevitably differ according to the nature of the watercourse, its surrounding area and the perceived issues and opportunities. Typically, the RVIs aim to increase awareness and opportunity amongst the local community, maintain and improve water quality, combat litter and debris in and around the river, increase use of the river and its environs as an educational resource, improve access, protect and improve nature conservation interests and encourage public, private and community interests to participate in the protection and enhancement of the river.

RVIs are thus concerned with nurturing links between diverse sectors of the community, establishing a sense of ownership in order that watercourses are treated as an environmental and community asset. The Weaver RVI in Cheshire is an excellent example of the way in which long-standing initiatives associated with a river can be encompassed and given new life. The nature conservation, recreational and tourist potential of the River Weaver has been recognized for a number of years, and a 1989 corridor study was undertaken by British Waterways, commissioned by Vale Royal Borough Council. Running 20 miles from Winsford to Runcorn on the Mersey, the Weaver is a navigable river with a rich industrial history and, increasingly, thriving wildlife, often co-existing with many redundant but in places still extensive salt workings. Building on a £4.5 million Cheshire County Council land reclamation programme centred on dereliction related to the salt extraction industry, the Weaver RVI has taken forward this stimulus to embrace nature conservation, landscape restoration and the realization of leisure and tourism potential. The Corridor Study identifies a number of nodes of activity along the length of the Weaver using the rich industrial heritage associated with the salt industry and its attractive landscape setting as the basis for the development of a linear park linked by a cycleway along the length of the river. This is being developed by Groundwork and will link into the network of cycleways in Cheshire and be part of the Sustrans network. The reclamation programme involves 265 acres (130 ha) which are

being extensively planted as part of the Mersey Forest with the aim of creating a new landscape setting for the Valley's industrial heritage. The Weaver RVI has embraced activity at a variety of scales, from large land reclamation and tree planting to local voluntary activity, carrying out programmes of woodland management, footpath maintenance and tree planting helped by grants made by the Mersey Basin Trust.

RVIs differ from established river valley management projects (such as those in Greater Manchester) in that they are not targeted solely at countryside management, access and recreation, and environmental improvement. They can cover economic development, for example, and can build on existing initiatives sometimes helping to reinvigorate latent interest. Their strength exists in the carrying forward of Campaign objectives at the local level and tapping into private sources of finance to help engender a sense of local ownership. The RVI concept enables an early assessment of the problems and opportunities through a RVI study in an area, and sets goals and targets through an Action Plan to address local needs whilst retaining a broader perspective. As such, they represent the translation of some of the principles of sustainability (understood in its broadest sense) into action on the ground, i.e. blending environmental, social and economic concerns using a common focus applicable at a variety of scales. Most recently, the opportunity for the reinforcement of the RVI concept is being developed through River Valleys Action. This initiative recognizes the inevitability of the differing practices across RVIs and hence seeks to spread good practice, more clearly focusing targets relating to Campaign objectives, the creation of an identity for the RVI approach and the development of links with training initiatives such as the Government's Welfare to Work (New Deal) proposals. In the case of the latter, partner organizations such as Groundwork, the Community Forests and Training and Enterprise Councils, acting as centres of excellence, could serve as delivery mechanisms for projects initiated by RVI Steering Groups.

The Mersey Estuary Management Plan

On a broader scale, another initiative is the Mersey Estuary Management Plan (MEMP), illustrating the potential for a collaborative approach to the management of the marine environment. Commissioned by the Mersey Basin Campaign as part of the Estuary Project Group, the Plan provides an advisory framework which enables existing interests to be safeguarded, new development proposals evaluated and the full potential of the Estuary as a natural resource realized. The plan's objectives "reflect the developed character of the estuary and the need to respond to development pressures in a way which is sensitive to the natural processes of the estuary and respects its nature conservation importance" (Kidd, 1995, p. 437). The nature conservation importance is reflected in the designation of much of the estuary's 200 km² extent as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Ramsar and Special Protection Area sites. Crucially, in the context of changing water quality (National Rivers Authority, 1995), the current nature conservation value has to be regarded as transitory (Kidd, 1995). The MEMP, launched in February 1996, recognizes this dynamism in its four strategic policy areas: estuary resources (estuary dynamics, water quality and pollution, biodiversity and land use); economic development; recreation; and plan implementation (MEMP, 1996). As with the emerging suite of coastal zone management plans,

the MEMP depends for its successful implementation upon the co-operation and participation of a wide range of organizations (Kidd, 1995). The strategic framework of the plan and the agreement of over 30 official bodies (local authorities, non-government organizations and government agencies) to a protocol pledging their intention to assist its implementation provide the basis for substantive and long term action.

Conclusions

The Mersey Basin Campaign has been a demonstrably successful initiative that has brought about not only the progressive improvement in river water quality through sustained investment, but also the realization of waterfront economic regeneration following targeted environment improvement (of which good water quality is a central component) and the nurturing of environmental activity and understanding amongst individuals and local groups. The Campaign has shown how novel institutional design can be used to address the challenges presented by city-region scale environmental and economic problems, greater environmental awareness and the demands for greater involvement in the determination of local environmental quality. Much of the Campaign's impact has been made at the local level using the principles of partnership to establish a sense of ownership amongst diverse elements of the community, and nurturing the recognition of common interest. The concept of sustainability integrally embraces notions of community action and, concomitantly, the need to find new forms of governance which more closely reflect and appeal to popular aspirations for greater control over the future constitution and quality of the environment. Accountability was highlighted as one of Healey's (1997) parameters in the design of institutions for working towards sustainability, reflecting the development of the assertion of stakeholder interests, in turn "[echoing] broad movements in British governance which seek to break out of hierarchical centralism and to widen the involvement and influence of citizens and business in public policy and its implementation" (Healey, 1998, p. 3). The inevitably diffuse nature of community involvement in the Mersey Basin Campaign makes this an important issue as the nature and degree of involvement is appraised in the future. Perhaps this is one of the trade-offs to be made in the pursuit of sustainable development.

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