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Regenerative city-regions: a new conceptual framework

Lorena F. Axinte ^a, Abid Mehmood ^a, Terry Marsden ^a and Dirk Roep ^b

ABSTRACT

The city-regional scale is increasingly being considered the most suitable level for planning and development, yet city-regions have often been established for purely economic reasons in the UK. This paper argues that city-regions are not mere socioeconomic units through which competitiveness can be achieved, but also rich, socioecological spaces. Although the progressive regionalist literature has taken significant steps in this direction, concerns remain that critical contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability, cultural viability, social exclusion or political (dis)empowerment have not been addressed in a holistic way. We attempt to advance the debate and overcome some of the shortcomings by connecting progressive regionalism with two other literature strands: collaborative governance and regenerative development. Based on the synergies found, we design a conceptual framework that can be used to study, understand and improve policy processes and practice, paving pathways towards regenerative city-regions.

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INTRODUCTION

City-regions have become a popular means for strategic spatial and political restructuring, sparking the interest of politicians, practitioners and academics alike. Some of the scholastic advocates are grouped under the *new regionalism* banner. They declared city-regions to be engines of growth and innovation (Harding, 2007; Scott, 2001; Scott, Agnew, Soja, & Storper, 2001) and an ideal scale for governance to acquire competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy (Allan, 2011, p. 7). Other promoters of ‘metromania’ – a label given by Morgan (2016) to criticize metro-centric economic policies that enforce agglomeration – include policy-makers (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union), consulting firms and popular media outlets.

By now this rather narrow conceptualization of city-regions has been widely debated (for an extensive account, see Beel, Jones, & Jones, 2016), highlighting the need for academic and policy

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discussions on city-regions to take a more critical approach and articulate larger problematics (Kipfer & Wirsig, 2004, p. 730). This parallel body of thought, often referred to as *progressive regionalism*, represents the point of departure of the present paper.

Progressive regionalism has reinvigorated the city-region debate by focusing especially on issues of social equity and sustainability, largely disregarded in the past (Pezzoli, Hibbard, & Huntoon, 2009, p. 336). Although we recognize its relative success, we argue that the progressive regionalism research programme is insufficiently developed to accommodate a systemic study and understanding of city-regions.

The present paper aims to overcome this deficiency by connecting with two other literature strands: *regenerative development* and *collaborative governance*. Whereas the former offers an aspirational agenda, the latter is a fundamental step for attaining these aspirations. This trilateral link can enrich the theoretical framework and help formulate a new methodological approach to the study of city-regions. We agree that there is a dire need to consider city-regions in all their complexity (Beel et al., 2016; Kipfer & Wirsig, 2004; Pezzoli et al., 2009). For this reason, we adopt an interdisciplinary lens which can consolidate the normative claims and theoretical assumptions of what progressive city-regions might look like.

By creating a novel framework, we address some criticisms and gaps identified in the literature. In line with Pezzoli et al. (2009, pp. 338–340), we conceptualize city-regions as both socioeconomic and socioecological spaces, and stress urban–rural interdependencies, surpassing the ‘economic reductionism readings of agglomeration’ (Beel et al., 2016, p. 518). At the same time, we intend to revive the academic debate around the ‘world of regionalisms’ proposed by Jonas and Ward (2002, 2007a, 2007b), emphasizing the state–civil society dimension that Morgan (2014) finds neglected in the contemporary discussions, particularly on European city-regionalism.

Our intellectual exercise is important to show how city-regional development can become more inclusive of environmental, social and cultural aspects, putting an emphasis on quality of life rather than on economic growth. Although we mainly address academics in the field, we hope our findings will appeal to policy-makers and practitioners, too. The new framework provides a set of principles to guide and improve policy formulation and implementation, and can be used as an analytical lens through which to investigate and assess city-regional policies and practices.

The paper is structured as follows. The following sections discuss separately each of the three key notions, before we integrate them into a new conceptual framework. The next section is a condensed account of the extensive city-region literature, with an emphasis placed on debates connected to progressive regionalism. We then explain in the third section how the discussion in sustainability science would benefit from adopting the regenerative development paradigm, despite its inherent elusiveness. At the same time, we demonstrate the suitability of the city-regional scale in the pursuit of regenerative development. The fourth section unfolds some of the main features of collaborative governance from the long and fuzzy debates surrounding the approach. It posits that despite their institutional complexity, city-regions can only function through collaborative ways of governance. The fifth section discusses the integrated conceptual framework, its possible application and challenges. We conclude that the proposed framework can act as a normative model for existing and emerging city-regions.

THE CITY-REGION DEBATE IN THE PROGRESSIVE REGIONALISM LITERATURE

Since the foundation (Kipfer & Wirsig, 2004) and consolidation (Pezzoli et al., 2009) of progressive regionalism as a distinct school of thought, both the practice and the theory around city-regions have developed exponentially, especially in the Western world. The city-regional literature has already been reviewed and critiqued extensively (Allan, 2011; Beel et al., 2016; Jonas & Moisiso, 2016; Jonas & Ward, 2002; Rodríguez-Pose, 2008; Ward & Jonas, 2004). Thus, we

focus primarily on studies that share characteristics of ‘socially and economically progressive new regionalism’ (Kipfer & Wirsig, 2004, p. 728).

This body of literature has emerged as a reaction to the frequently prompted narrative that city-regions, as ‘motors of the global economy’ (Scott et al., 2001, p. 7), should aim to grow and become competitive agglomerations. The failure of trickle-down economics to redistribute benefits, and of economic growth to clean the pollution it creates (Raworth, 2017a, p. 24), inspired critical directions among academics. By and large, progressive regionalists have been explicitly concerned with issues of governance and sustainability (Provo, 2009, p. 368).

Without denying the diversity of practices and narratives, Pezzoli et al. (2009) identified certain normative features of progressive regionalism. The regional programme should concentrate on reducing the ‘root causes of poverty, social injustice and environmental degradation’. To achieve these aims, places should be analyzed through their territorial specificities as well as their ‘complex and multi-scalar flows of material, energy, and knowledge resources’. City-regions, thus, do not function in a vacuum, but are interconnected and influenced by neighbourhood, local, national and global levels. Moreover, ‘civically engaged research, critical theory and collective action’ should accompany decisions taken for development (Pezzoli et al., 2009, p. 337).

In an analogous argument made previously, Ward and Jonas (2004, p. 2121) highlighted the need to treat city-regions as more than ‘sites of exchange, innovation, development, and competition’ in order to uncover issues related to social reproduction, redistribution, politics and conflict. More critically, Etherington and Jones (2009) have questioned the usefulness of the city-region as an administrative level. They showed that the competitiveness model increases uneven development, and certain levels of inequality can even hinder growth (a conclusion also reached by Beel, Jones, Jones, & Escadale, 2017; and Benner & Pastor, 2015a, 2015b). In a study of English devolution, Etherington and Jones (2016, p. 386) argue that the current framework of the deals agreed between city-regions and the UK government will only exacerbate the ‘deeply historical problem of uneven growth’, leaving disadvantaged groups voiceless. This is further confirmed in the case of Wales where, although influenced by different factors than in England, the deal-signing process was deemed as technocratic and elitist (Beel, Jones, & Jones, 2018, p. 2).

Several studies have highlighted the need for broader inclusion and participation in the city-regional fora, with varying degrees of success. Sites (2004) has investigated the potential of grass-roots participation to lead to ‘sustainable, redistributive metropolitan regimes’. His study confirms that although effects can sometimes be limited, enhancing public involvement in (re-)forming city-regions could heighten democratic practices and shape the path towards a ‘comprehensively progressive’ region. Looking at Greater Manchester, Beel et al. (2017) made the case for civil society actors to be strongly represented in city-regional governance structures. These stakeholders’ expertise and innovative approaches have better chances at filtering down economic development to places and people previously left out.

However, earlier research (Weir & Rongerude, 2007) shows, at least in American transport politics, that multilevel political power, and not participation in regional fora per se, can ensure that low-income communities benefit from growth. This idea was to some extent reinforced by Swanstrom and Banks (2008) and Provo (2009) who highlighted the need for higher level governmental intervention and support for placing equity at the core of regional agenda.

Thus, the academic debate has stressed the need to shift policy and political discourse, to avoid developmental strategies from being simply economically efficient, to being equitable and environmentally sound (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008, pp. 1033–1034). Ravetz (2000) conducted a wide-ranging study of what a sustainable city-region could mean by using a multi-sectoral, systems-thinking approach in Greater Manchester. He highlighted the complexities and contradictions present in any development plan, yet argues that the city-regional scale, if supported by national and international levels, is essential in striking a balance between social, economic

and environmental goals for current and future generations. Instead of defining a blueprint for sustainable development, Ravetz (2000, p. 276) emphasized the need for ‘building vision, creating synergy, managing complexity and resolving conflict’.

Almost 20 years later, we believe it is time to move beyond the sustainability agenda, seeing that most efforts so far have only strived to minimize the detrimental impacts of economic development on the environment, rather than to create positive outcomes. The following section shows the potential offered by the regenerative development paradigm.

CITY-REGIONS AS A LOCUS FOR REGENERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

As a concept, *sustainability* has had a tremendous evolution since the late 20th century when it first appeared. Expanding well beyond academia, it became an orthodoxy for discourses in the spheres of public, private and third sector. Despite its broadly accepted connotation, ‘sustainable’ has been overused, interpreted, redefined and measured in various ways. More often than not, a certain dimension has been emphasized at the expense of others, lacking holistic approaches and generating unanticipated problems (e.g., the economic pillar before everything else in the case of city-regions).

To emphasize the pitfalls, du Plessis (2012) describes the co-evolution of two contemporary sustainability paradigms, one in public policy and the other in the private sector. In her view, both are inherently flawed because they do not challenge the status quo, maintaining a dysfunctional, exploitative human–nature relationship. In the first case, international institutions negotiate an ‘idealistic’ vision of sustainability and create public policies that are dominated by an occidental system of values. In the second case, the business sector strives to advocate for ‘ecological modernization’, seeking profit yet staying eco-efficient. While this is better than nothing, nature and humans remain pure factors of production or economic commodities.

An alternative, third paradigm identified by du Plessis (inspired by Lyle, 1994) is that of *regenerative development*. Being a holistic approach, it advances from minimal or neutral environmental impact to creating positive effects for a ‘mutually supportive symbiosis’ between the built, cultural and natural environments. Having degraded not only the environment but also our social and cultural systems, we need to do much more to restore and enhance ecosystems and community health (Wahl, 2016). Thus, considering the multiple crises that societies go through today, it is no longer sufficient to sustain or remain 100% neutral.

The regenerative paradigm marks ‘a significant evolution in the concept and application of sustainability’. Instead of minimizing the damage on the environment, it seeks ways to produce mutual benefits for all social, technical and ecological systems (Mang & Reed, 2012, p. 3). For this to happen, we need to change our anthropocentric worldview that commodifies and exploits nature, as if the planetary resources are there to cater for the ever-growing human needs (du Plessis, 2012; Foss, 2012; Girardet, 2015; Mang & Reed, 2012).

Once the human–nature dualism disappears, it is possible to see humans as part of nature – just another ecosystem among the many. Through this non-hierarchical lens, people can learn to co-evolve and create a harmonious relationship with the places they inhabit, acknowledging that any action will produce multiple interactions and effects (Cole, 2012). The intensification of natural disasters in the past decades might be the best proof that steps undertaken so far in the quest for sustainable development have not been sufficient and we urgently need to reconsider our existence and lifestyles (Wahl, 2016).

By now, these ideas have gained popularity through Girardet’s work for the World Future Council, which advanced the notion of *regenerative cities*. A regenerative city develops a restorative, mutually enhancing relationship with the natural systems that sustain it (Girardet, 2010). At its core lies the model of urban metabolism, adopted from Wolman (1965). Girardet differentiates between an existing state (linear metabolism) and a desirable one (circular metabolism).

In the former, resources are inefficiently used, and the waste produced is further externalized. Circularity in natural systems, on the other hand, exemplifies how waste can be reconverted into nutrients (Girardet, 2010, 2015).

Besides, in a regenerative city, sectors such as transport, food, energy, water and waste, as well as important key social aspects related to governance, participation and engagement, are integrated. The sustainability argument has often treated them in isolation. This led to a fragmented vision that prevented a real understanding of the crises currently affecting the world, their underlying causes and the relations that determine how systems function (Foss, 2012). An interesting analogy offered by Foss (2012) is that of a human body: having some healthy, sustainable organs might not be sufficient for the entire body's survival, let alone well-being.

Another central idea in the regenerative cities literature is that cities may well be at the forefront of development, yet they have always relied on resources coming from outside their administrative boundaries (Girardet, 2010). Thus, the regenerative development paradigm reconsiders the division between the rural and the urban. Even if cities remain the engines of progress, the fuel is outsourced. Processes of urbanization with afferent economic functions and environmental transformation are now clearly visible in the so-called countryside as well, turning it into an operational landscape which supports urban growth elsewhere (Brenner & Mares, 2015).

These urban–rural linkages were underscored by the New Urban Agenda (UN Habitat, 2017), too, and, coming from an influential international agency, it played an important role in raising awareness among national, regional and local actors. However, the agenda promotes development through growth as a necessity and ignores the fact that some places might thrive by reorganizing or even adopting de-growth policies. Moreover, it continues to endorse place competition, without acknowledging that this model inevitably creates winners and losers, and fails to reduce inequalities.

As an alternative, regenerative development requires restoring and nourishing the relationship between cities and their hinterland, whether it is in close proximity or spread around the world (Girardet, 2015). Indeed, most cities' footprints have gone past boundaries and have become global, being 'embedded in dense and multi-layered networks of local, regional, national and global connections' (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003, p. 899).

City-regions, in this respect, offer scope for regenerative development. The emphasis of the regenerative paradigm on overcoming the traditional urban–rural divide offers the 'countervailing vision that can challenge the metro-centric bias that takes the hinterland for granted' (Pezzoli, Williams, & Krietich, 2011, p. 17).

While taking a relational approach, regenerative development acknowledges the importance of place since all processes occurring are influenced by bioregional and cultural particularities (Foss, 2012). Thus, place is conceived in harmony with Massey's (1993, pp. 66–68) reasoning: places are not introverted areas with boundaries but 'fluid constructions of particular relational assemblages in certain environments and specific moments'. It becomes obvious then that regeneration cannot mean going back to a certain state from the past since the world is constantly changing and new relationships forming. Instead, a regenerative city-region tries to rely and build on existing local resources and assets as much as possible while constantly developing a beneficial relationship with the surrounding areas (World Future Council/Energy Cities, 2014).

Boselli (2016) makes further conceptual clarifications. He emphasizes that the regenerative development approach is different from urban regeneration discourses and schemes that have narrowly focused on the physical environment. The latter, sometimes used as governmental measures for re-differentiation, caused evictions and displacement through gentrification (Cameron, 1992). Thus, conscious of the negative connotation the term 'regeneration' may invoke, Boselli (2016) describes four types of fundamental actions encompassed by regenerative development:

- Resource regeneration, which allows switching from linear to circular flows.
- Natural capital and ecosystems regeneration, including urban agriculture and enhanced ecosystem service infrastructure within the urban area.
- Regeneration of built spaces, densification to avoid sprawl and significant improvement for the citizens' life quality.
- Community regeneration by strengthening the involvement of local individuals, communities and businesses in decision-making processes and management activities within the city. In this case, policy-makers create an inclusive framework for collaboration that encourages 'the informal sector, local youth and marginalized groups' to participate actively as well.

Consequently, the regenerative model highlights the idea that change cannot happen without the active engagement of all stakeholders. Sustainability issues are indeed 'wicked problems' characterized by ambiguous and tangled traits that are difficult to define and solve (Gollagher & Hartz-Karp, 2013; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Even if authorities design perfect policies or strategies, they cannot implement, maintain or adapt them without the help of all actors affected. In the end, the behaviour of the end users can determine the success or failure of a certain plan.

Gollagher and Hartz-Karp (2013) assert that to reach a systemic response, disparate stakeholder groups must not only come together for discussion and decision-making but also take responsibility and be accountable to the other. Moreover, because of the wide range of sustainability problems, it is necessary to integrate 'universal knowledge with knowledge particular to the social, ecological, and historical circumstances of actual places' (Gollagher & Hartz-Karp, 2013, p. 2346). In addition, achieving regenerative development requires combining this intrinsic wisdom, often embodied in people and places, with the expert knowledge developed by modern science and technology.

It is thus possible to argue that the pathway towards regenerative city-regions requires strong collaboration between the different parties concerned. Certainly, city-regions are not a natural occurrence but a social construct established to serve specific interests (Allan, 2011; Jonas & Ward, 2002). Not acknowledging the human agency behind the city-region can lead to black-boxing the real dynamics and power struggles. Thus, although city-regional arrangements are characterized by an enlargement of the array of actors, studies have shown that the civil society or underprivileged community advocates are often left outside or incapable of having any real influence in regional fora (Sites, 2004; Weir & Rongerude, 2007). Hence, the following section focuses on the concept of collaborative governance, suggesting its potential to turn city-regions into an 'organizing device' (Healey, 2009, p. 832) for regenerative development.

REGENERATIVE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Many of the governance institutions are overpowered by the 'myriad of worsening ecological, social and economic problems' (Orr, 2013). This calls for a redefinition of goals and methods to achieve them by breaking traditional hierarchies and silos. Collaborative processes that bring together public, private and non-profit stakeholders to develop solutions for shared issues can help in the governance of collective affairs.

We choose the notion of *collaborative governance*, although 'empirical phenomena alike' (Plotnikof, 2015, p. 64) are sometimes called *empowered participatory governance* by Fung and Olin Wright (as cited in Briggs, 2008, p. 37), *participatory governance* by Fischer (2010), or *deliberate collaborative governance* by Gollagher and Hartz-Karp (2013). We adopt Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh's (2012, p. 2) definition of collaborative governance:

processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished.

Collaborative modes of governance offer a number of advantages. The literature documented the success in creating more efficient and effective programmes that are people oriented, attuned to local conditions and have the capacity to adapt and respond to emerging issues (Collinge & Gibney, 2010; Fischer, 2010; Healey, 2005). Despite being a time-consuming process, once stakeholders achieved consensus, collaboration can save valuable time and energy in the implementation phase (Ansell, 2012, p. 503; Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 563).

Greater transparency, accountability as well as legitimacy are some of the other benefits identified, along with enhanced inter-institutional dialogue (Emerson et al., 2012; Fischer, 2010; Francesch-Huidobro, 2015; Gollagher & Hartz-Karp, 2013; National Policy Consensus Center, 2007). According to Ansell and Gash (2008, pp. 561–562), the rewards promised by collaborative strategies also encompass new cooperation between former adversaries, fruitful relationships between the public sector and individuals, as well as innovative experiences of collective learning and problem-solving.

Nonetheless, examples showed that the long list of advantages brought by collaborative governance is matched by an equally long list of difficulties that stakeholders need to overcome. Generally, the larger number of stakeholders, the bigger the chance that collaboration becomes problematic. Thus, in the case of complex geographies, such as city-regions, deterrents can easily multiply.

One of the main problems identified by Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 2345) is that often, neither the civic nor the governmental institutions are prepared to open up to collaboration. ‘The existing civic and governmental infrastructure – the web of relationships, practices, habits, procedures, and processes’ (Gollagher & Hartz-Karp, 2013, p. 2345) – does not offer a space for meaningful engagement between inhabitants, organizations, private and public bodies. Although authorities have sometimes considered public consultation as forms of collaborative governance, the role of non-state stakeholders must be more than simply ceremonial: communication and influence should go both ways (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In this regard, Ansell (2012, p. 499) considers that while consultation is simply a gauging of public opinion, public hearings alone should not be included in the category of collaborative modes of governance either since they are typically neither consensus oriented nor deliberative.

Thus, societies need a new ‘civic space’ to allow all these different stakeholders to come together and deliberate about issues, ideas and potential actions. Indeed, this entails a certain transfer of power from the authorities’ side, translating into a de facto loss of monopoly on decision-making for the state which becomes an ‘authority manager’ of public goods (Papadopoulos, 2012, p. 512).

At the same time, collaboration translates into a shared responsibility for the outcomes, meaning that all parties have to take responsibility. In addition, participation and engagement are, unquestionably, both a matter of competence and sufficient incentive. A common constraint for citizens is their lack of expertise in highly technical problems (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 551). However, as previously emphasized, the pathways to regenerative development require different types of knowledge, and in order for citizens to participate, they have to be convinced that their effort and time are worth investing (Fischer, 2010, p. 5).

Despite the extensive number of variables on which it depends, collaborative governance remains widely regarded as the most appropriate means for solving wicked problems (Fischer, 2010; Francesch-Huidobro, 2015; Goldstein, 2012; Gollagher & Hartz-Karp, 2013; Healey, 2005; Henton, Melville, Amsler, & Kopell, 2005). Depending on numerous actors, it is contingent to historical, political, social, cultural and economic contexts, as well as personalities, motivation and hierarchies of power. This does not mean that higher administrative levels or systems

that are more complex should abandon it, but rather invest more work in finding the appropriate form and ways of organization.

For city-regions, ‘good governance practices’ require greater coordination, both vertically (between local, regional, national and supranational institutions) and horizontally (between public–private–civil societies). This can allow better interaction in the decision-making process and a more flexible, multi-agency framework (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008, p. 1034). Investigating the Stuttgart region, Frank and Morgan (2012, p. 15) have shown that ‘metro-governance is more of a political art than a technocratic exercise’ and that ignoring civil society can prevent even well-conceived projects from materializing.

CITY-REGIONS: A HOLISTIC-INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Having discussed each of the three key concepts and their potential interlinkages, we now integrate them into a conceptual framework to show their theoretical connections in the case of city-regions. The columns in Figure 1 highlight the synergetic philosophy, focus, framework, setting, actors and extent. These are the angles on which regenerative development, collaborative governance and progressive regionalism – summarized in separate rows – share commonalities. By emphasizing these connections, we suggest possible pathways towards regenerative city-regions, highlighting at the same time the aspects that need to be included in a new research agenda.

Despite their different underlying philosophies, the three concepts have compatible guiding principles. Hence, a progressive city-region, where equity and sustainability are key (Pezzoli et al., 2009), would need to redefine its goals to support the regeneration, rather than the sustenance of already degraded systems and resources. Its success would require constructive collaborations between the different private, public and civic spheres. As Raworth (2017b) argues, the economies we design should be regenerative and distributive by design, instead of waiting for growth to level or clean things up.

In the same way, the framework shows that combining the three notions’ foci can lead to a holistic vision aiming to eradicate the ‘root causes of poverty, social injustice and environmental degradation’ (Pezzoli et al., 2009, p. 337). As such, problems are often linked to each other;

PHILOSOPHY	FOCUS	EXTENT		FRAMEWORK	SETTING	ACTORS
promotion of equitable and sustainable development at city-region scale	eradicating root causes of poverty, social injustice, and environmental degradation	all-inclusive development, beyond competitive policies and sectors	PROGRESSIVE REGIONALISM	increasingly globalized world characterised by complex and multi-scalar flows of material, energy, and knowledge resources	regions as socioeconomic and socioecological spaces where the rural-urban divide is reconsidered	stakeholder involvement, state-society synergy, collective action
regeneration rather than sustenance of already deteriorated environments	respect for place and creation of conditions for all forms of life to thrive	holistic approach: regeneration of resources, natural capital and human ecosystems	REGENERATIVE DEVELOPMENT	interrelatedness of all ecosystems, including the human one	· reconnection between cities and their hinterland · place as unique setting of complex interactions	engagement and commitment of all human beings and co-evolution of human and natural systems in partnered relationship
constructive collaboration across public, private and civic spheres for deliberation, policy making and implementation	local empowerment, decentralisation of decision-making processes and power	multiplicity of actors, from all societal segments	COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE	collaboration between different stakeholders and levels of governance (vertical and horizontal)	complex and dynamic institutional environments	mutual engagement between public and private actors, shared responsibility for decisions and enactment

Figure 1. Integrated conceptual framework for regenerative city-regions.

dealing with them requires one to steer away from a mere human-centred development strategy towards a socioecologically sensitive and inclusive understanding of places.

Concurrent in their extent, the three concepts aim for universality, a wide inclusion of all possible stakeholders (humans and non-humans) and all spheres for development. We need to change our perspective on what the economy is, acknowledging how it is embedded in society and the different forms it takes. This would help us gain a richer picture of us – as social, adaptable human beings rather than as rational economic ones (Raworth, 2017b).

Furthermore, each concept operates in a relational framework, acknowledging multiple variables and non-linearity. From this point of view, progressive city-regions are conceived as elements of a world of ‘complex and multi-scalar flows of material, energy, and knowledge’ (Pezzoli et al., 2009, p. 337). Similarly, the regenerative paradigm draws attention to the necessity of understanding the socioecological environment in all its intricacy to define pathways for development. Collaborative governance, by definition, places an emphasis on the multitude of stakeholders involved at different interconnected levels.

The three notions share an affinity for the setting and the actors as well. Certainly, the governance regime of a city-region is intricate and dynamic and ‘as institutional infrastructures become more complex and interdependent, the demand for collaboration increases’ (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544). Collaboration is therefore essential to create progressive city-regions by building on both the socioeconomic and the socioecological relations shaping it (Pezzoli et al., 2009, p. 339). A city-region is not only defined by the population’s daily commuting trips but also by a particular combination of land, vegetation and water, among many other elements. Bringing to the surface a wider range of interdependencies between urban and rural areas could reduce the disconnection of city-regions from their hinterlands. As a result, policies and projects would be balanced and better distributed across to avoid zero-sum games. Finally, an approach to a progressive city-region would put places and people at the core of all processes, recognizing that leadership and responsibility needs to be shared while integrated across scales.

It is certainly worth discussing the shortcomings of this framework, too. First, this paper presents both regenerative development and collaborative governance in their ideal forms. The concepts’ qualities of being elastic and adaptable to different environments can also turn them into elusive realities.

Unfortunately, there is no ‘regenerative city-region’ for the moment, although certain places seem to have started promising journeys on this path. For instance, Adelaide in Australia hosted Herbert Girardet as ‘thinker in residence’ while he worked together with communities and other professionals to explore options for turning the city-region into a regenerative one. Achievements include the development of a new green economy that is ‘also actively contributing to the well-being and restoration of ecosystems in South Australia’ (Girardet, 2012, p. 3). In Europe, Copenhagen in Denmark is often a pioneer in terms of environmental initiatives, aiming to be the world’s first CO₂-neutral capital by 2025, while Denmark (whose official brand has become *State of Green*) intends to be independent of fossil fuels by 2050 (City of Copenhagen, 2014).

Nonetheless, even these cutting-edge cities still have problematic areas that need improvement, proving that transforming the regenerative paradigm into reality is a real challenge. Even in the quest for sustainability, places around the world show that it is difficult to find a balance between people, planet and profit. Undoubtedly, ‘cities that perform well economically do so at a high environmental cost’ (Arcadis, 2015, p. 34), while others that show extraordinary innovations in environmental and economic measures might still struggle with social issues.

Similarly, multilayered political, legal, socioeconomic and environmental systemic circumstances define the dynamics and actions that ‘shape the overall quality and extent to which a collaborative governance regime is developed’ (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 6). Certainly, city-regions are spaces that have to accommodate contested interests and that deal with complex problems. As Girardet (2015) noted, although a wide range of technical, management and policy solutions

already exist, city-regions are in dire need of holistic approaches of policy-making and governance born out of concerted efforts of diverse stakeholders. Moreover, as Beel et al. (2018) have shown, when city-regions are designed solely for economic growth – as often happens in the UK – the ‘rules of the game’ and the stakeholders are automatically reduced to business and political elites.

Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the reconceptualization of city-regions as spaces for regenerative development through collaborative governance offers new perspectives. The ideas were already available in the different literature strands, yet their combined effect and potential for empirical application have never been highlighted before. Thus, we believe that by capitalizing on these synergies, this integrative conceptual framework can be used to study, understand and improve policy processes and practices. It is not a programme that can be implemented, but rather a standard that should guide the formulation and enactment of policies at city-regional level.

TOWARDS A REGENERATIVE CITY-REGION

This paper took the theoretical debate around progressive regionalism further, having emerged from asking how two other literature strands could benefit this discussion. The first sections explored the three key concepts individually, acknowledging that each could be debated in much greater depth. These brief accounts laid the groundwork to introduce a new conceptual framework and demonstrate the synergies between regenerative development, collaborative governance and progressive regionalism.

We offer our framework as a departure point to counterbalance the purely economic rationale which has often been the main driver in the establishment and the analysis of city-regions. We argue that by changing the development paradigm with one that is holistic, and by adopting more collaborative ways of governance, it is possible to find a balance and reach broader accomplishments.

Although many studies have unveiled that agglomeration at city-regional scale reinforces structural inequalities and largely ignores sustainability issues (Beel et al., 2016), British city-regions are still largely driven by this model. Encouraged to compete nationally and internationally, their success (and, therefore, their governmental funding) is measured in terms of gross value added (GVA) growth. Yet, an overemphasis on development and competitiveness does not necessarily improve the economic condition of the entire city-region and trickle-down effects do not automatically become a reality.

Moreover, GVA does not measure numerous aspects that are intrinsically important in everyday lives of citizens: health and well-being, jobs that allow a better work–life balance while still being fulfilling, improved standards of social care, environmental assets or cultural capital, to name only a few (Bristow, 2010; Raworth, 2017a). Focusing on it and reducing the economy to this one variable risks widening the gap between deprived and wealthy communities, sacrificing nature for the sake of profit and disregarding so many other ‘economies’ that are based on care, cooperatives or alternative currencies. As the World Economic Forum (2018) demonstrated, a more comprehensive measure for development can show how social polarization and low living standards are on a rise despite a high gross domestic product (GDP) level in the UK.

Our integrated framework shows that city-regions are complex establishments where collaboration could be expanded in ways that would benefit local communities in much richer way, including, but also beyond, financial gains. A few examples could be creating green regional corridors that encourage responsible tourism, linking communities and building cultural programmes based on their common heritage, or connecting schools across cities and their hinterlands to reduce the levels of stigma.

Certainly, there is nothing inherently wrong with city-regional efforts for economic development, yet, as Raworth (2017a, pp. 21–25) argues, we should change the goal from mere growth to ensure the thriving of all living things, meeting the needs of all within the means of our planet. We, like others before us, have become growth-agnostic (Jackson & Webster, 2016; Lang &

Marsden, 2017; Raworth, 2017a). We are questioning whether our economies still need to grow, or if our current and future well-being might be much more dependent on other factors that deserve equal attention from today's political elites. We hope the present work opens a platform on which to explore alternatives for progressive regenerative city-regions.

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