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## Who influences policy? Analysing actor influence on the UK sustainable development strategy

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**Abstract:** Sustainable development is a multiactor concept, but who really has influence in the policy arena? A framework of influence has been devised to aid the identification and understanding of such influence, incorporating theories of power and discourse. This framework has been applied to the review of the UK sustainable development strategy, using the qualitative methods of observation, interview and discourse analysis. Through the use of the framework it is demonstrated that tacit influence is playing a significant role in policy development even in a situation where a detailed formal consultation process had been completed.

**Keywords:** non-state actors; power and influence; sustainable development strategies; decision making; policy formation.

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### 1 Introduction

Different actors have influenced the development of the UK national sustainable development strategy. A framework of influence has been devised to aid the identification and understanding of such influence, with particular reference to business. The theoretical basis of the framework has been informed by the debate on the dimensions of power (Lukes, 1974, 2005), pressure politics, government/business relations and the structural approach of epistemic communities all in conjunction with the use of discourse analysis. The completed framework allows for a more robust understanding of the policy decision-making process. It provides non-state actors with a tool to assess theirs and others strategies, it allows policymakers to better understand the

activities of non-state actors within the process and provides analysts with a structured method to assess the true role of non-state actors, particularly MNCs in sustainable development policy. The data from the UK case study is derived from; interviews with relevant personnel in government, business and other non-state actors; non-participant observation at meetings and review of documents, produced by both government and consultees. This paper provides an overview of the framework and its development, reviews the consultation process surrounding the new UK Sustainable Development Strategy and finally evaluates the influences at play in this policy decision-making process through the use of the framework of influence.

## 2 A framework of influence

Before evaluating the specific example of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy a brief discussion of the framework of influence is given. The framework of influence has been developed to systemically view the role of different actors in the UK sustainable development policy arena. Due to its focus on both influence and actors, the framework is referred to as the Actor Influence Framework (AIF). The AIF serves as a lens through which the activities of the actors participating in the review of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy decision-making process and the formulation of the new strategy '*Securing the future*' can be assessed. The policy decision-making process is dynamic and fluid, particularly in an interdisciplinary area such as sustainable development and exists within a complex governance structure; therefore it is vital for the AIF to reflect such an environment. The AIF allows for the overall role of different actors within national sustainable development policy to be broken down into the individual actions, from this point any interrelationships between actions and actors can be assessed. Subsequently, the AIF provides a mechanism to identify the affecting and resulting influence of such actions. This is an important element of AIF as influence can be noted throughout the policy process, this is referred to as intermediate influence and not just at the point of final policy outcome. In a broader sense the AIF allows for the evaluation of differential access which may occur within the policy setting.

The framework incorporates the works of Lukes (1974, 2005), Dahl (1961) and Bachrach and Baratz (1970) relating to the dimensions of power, along with the integration of discourse analysis, specifically addressing the question of discursive formation (see Cousins and Hussain, 1984). Literature relating to pressure politics, government/business relationship and epistemic communities has also been considered. The work of Newell (2000) addressing the involvement of non-state actors in the global politics of climate change has also been drawn upon both in theoretical and methodological terms. Newell's work has been expanded upon through the integration of discourse analysis. The theoretical development of the AIF demonstrates the key to the framework; tacit and direct influence are both incorporated.

In this context the term discourse refers to an overarching set of language and practices which are evident within documents, meetings and interviews. The use of discourse is important for three reasons. Firstly, it allows for the intrinsic link between power/knowledge and discourse (see Foucault, 1972, 1980), employing discourse as a system of representation rather than a purely linguistic review. Secondly, from a decision-making perspective it allows for more understanding of the position of the different actors as, to a certain extent, it provides a lens to view the underlying

assumptions of an actor. Finally, discourse enables an understanding of the key themes being promoted and considered during the policy decision-making process.

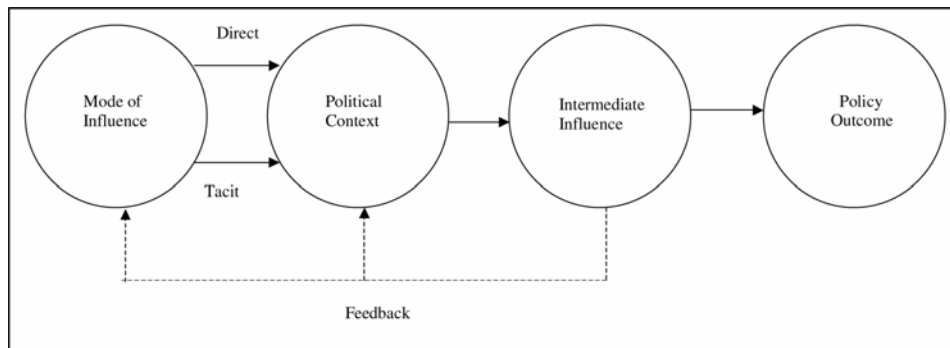
## 2.1 The actor influence framework

The AIF is stratified along three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary level is the policy decision-making context; the secondary level expands the notion of mode and intermediate influence and the tertiary level details the complex national interrelationships. The complexity of detail increases with each level. Stratification enables the framework to include the detail of specific decision making and relates this to the wider governance structure in which sustainable development is located. The three levels of AIF are outlined below.

### 2.1.1 The primary level

The *primary level* represents the policy making context, it is divided into four elements (see Figure 1); the mode of influence, political context and intermediate influence. The elements can interact and feedback a number of times before a policy outcome is reached. The policy outcome represents the completion of the decision-making process, this is often not a definitive and point. In terms of the national sustainable development strategy there are on-going decisions relating to issue specific policy and discussions. The four elements are outlined in a little more detail below:

**Figure 1** Primary level: policy decision-making context



*Mode of influence:* a method which an actor can employ which may influence the policymaking process. These modes can employ either a direct or tacit approach.

*Political context:* this can be International, European or National. The political context allows for the institutional structures at play in the decision-making process to be taken into account. In this case the National political context is the UK sustainable development strategy, will be further broken down in the tertiary level of the model.

*Intermediate influence:* the specific result of the interaction between the mode of influence and the political context, this is an intermediate stage prior to the final policy outcome. This element is vital as it allows the continuous process to be assessed and does not see the policy process as a simple causal A effects B model.

*Policy outcome:* the final policy decision that is only reached once the decision-making process is complete and a policy is ratified.

The mode of influence; political context and intermediate influence, occur within a cyclic relationship, through a feedback mechanism. The impact of the political context on the chosen mode of influence may be such that it leads the actor to alter their activities or indeed change the mode of influence which they are adopting. Furthermore, the outcome of the intermediate influence maybe such that it leads to a change in the basis of the decision-making process. Consequently non-state and state actors may alter the mode of influence employed. Feedback is not restricted to the decision-making process itself; the intermediate influence maybe such that it affects the actor themselves. For example, the intermediate influence maybe that the status of a company has increased, this will subsequent alter the way in which the actor performs within the policy process in future as an increase in status often leads to an increased acceptance of the actor within the decision-making process.

### 2.1.2 The secondary level

The *secondary level* expands the notion of mode and influence in the decision-making process. It represents an intermediate stage of the AIF giving specific details of the mode of influence and intermediate influence without addressing the interplay and interdependences between these elements. Table 1 outlines how the different modes and intermediate influences link together. It can be seen here that a number of the intermediate influences are a result of the enactment of various modes. Although the secondary level addresses the influence relationships enacted at an International, European and National context, this paper focuses only on the National context. The objective of the secondary level of AIF is to identify all possible modes of influence and subsequent related intermediate influence. The modes of intermediate influence are described in Table 2, some of the less self-evident modes are expanded upon below.

**Table 1** Secondary level mode-influence: relationship between mode and intermediate influence

<i>Mode</i>	<i>Intermediate influence</i>
<i>Direct</i>	
Lobbying	1, 2, 3, 4
Political donations	2, 4
Consultation	1, 4, 5
Advisory committees	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8
Task force	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9
Quangos	1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10
Staff secondment	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11
Revolving door	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, on a longer term basis as staff secondment
<i>Tacit</i>	
Trade associations	1, 2, 4, 15
Agenda setting	1, 2, 7
Marketing strategy	1, 2
Cross department influence	2, 3, 7, 10, 12, 14
Perceived power	2, 4, 5, 7
Research	1, 9, 13

**Table 1** Secondary level mode-influence: relationship between mode and intermediate influence (continued)

<i>Mode</i>	<i>Intermediate influence</i>
Support of external organisations	1, 2, 7, 9, 12
Business location/relocation	2, 4, 5
<i>Code</i>	<i>Intermediate influence</i>
1	Accepted discourse
2	Non-decision-making
3	Timescale
4	Policy preference
5	Anticipated reactions
6	Increased status
7	Mobilisation of bias
8	Accepted insider
9	<i>Status</i>
10	Cross-issue influence
11	<i>Business insight</i>
12	Negotiating positions of others
13	<i>Leadership</i>
14	Clash ministerial powers
15	Dual stance

**Table 2** Secondary level mode-influence: outlines of intermediate influences

Non-decision-making	“Is the politically imposed limitations upon the scope of decision-making” (Crenson, 1971, p.178)
Accepted discourse	Accepted understanding and articulation of sustainable development recognised by the majority of actors, particular the policy makers themselves
Negotiating position of others/anticipated reaction	Activity/stance of one actor leads to others changing their policy requirements. Perceived power of an actor is such that other actors change their negotiating position
Dual stance	Being part of an organised external group allows an actor to take and individual ‘acceptable’ stance whilst the group takes a more controversial stance
Policy preference	Activity of one actor changes the policy preference of other actors, particularly that of government
Timescale	Chosen mode of influence leads to either a delay in decision-making or a policy being rushed through to prevent open discussion
Increased status	Leads to an increase in the perceived standing of the actor both by other actors within the policy making arena and wider society. Individuals and groups become seen as ‘experts’
Mobilisation of bias	Activity of an actor results in decision-making being confined to ‘safe’ issues
Accepted insider	Group which is given legitimacy by government/policy-maker and subsequently consulted on a regular basis
Cross-issue influence	Influence in other policy decision-making processes involve other, usually related policy negotiations

*Agenda-setting* is the method by which actors and policy makers set the boundaries and language in which policy decision-making is framed. Agenda-setting is key to the acceptance of discourse and the resulting intermediate influence of non-decision-making. For further discussion see Schattschneider (1960) and Cobb and Elder (1972). In this research, agenda-setting has been addressed as a mode of influence rather than as an outcome. For other authors, such as Newell (2000) it has been seen as a stage in the policy process. Although this can be seen as correct, in relation to the stage at the beginning of the policy decision-making process which focuses primarily on the problem and scope of the action. Nevertheless, discourse is constructed and manipulated throughout the life of the decision-making process. Therefore, this research takes the stance that an actor can gain influence through this means within this process.

The phenomenon of *revolving door* (Newell, 2000) occurs when former business executives, particularly those in senior positions leave company positions to take up office with the Government, European Commission or associated groups and vice versa. This provides for a continual exchange of ideas and principles between institutions, often in a more open and effective way than when individuals are seconded on a limited timeframe.

An important, yet often overlooked, element of the policy decision-making process is that of *perceived power* (following Dowding, 1991; Lukes, 1974, 2005) this is in essence a truly tacit mode of influence. The power of a certain actor or group of actors is such that either the other non-state actors or indeed the policy makers 'second guess' their stance and take a position to reflect this. Perceived power can lead to positive and negative responses. For example, a NGO may decide what they think is going to be a business stance and subsequently take a more extreme position than normal or in contrast take a position which is more aligned with their perception in the hope of securing an agreed outcome. Within this research perceived power is seen as a mode of influence rather than a resultant intermediate influence, as the existence of such a perception is the method which leads to a variety of intermediate influences, as outlined in Table 1. In addition, the perceived power also plays an important role in the use of status and legitimacy by the actor themselves, moving towards a more direct mode of influence. It is important to see how this perceived power relates to the institutional structure of the decision-making process.

The intermediate influence primarily refers to outcomes of the modes employed, which affect the overall decision-making process. However individual outcomes form part of the feedback loop to the political context, mode of influence and the actor.

A crucial element of AIF is the ability to identify and break down the modes of influence and intermediate influence into their individual components. These individual components are subsequently incorporated into the final stage of the model to evaluate the full interplay of the actors and their methods. In itself the secondary level begins to demonstrate the number of different modes of influence which are available within the current governance systems, at all levels of the political context. It also shows that it is not a straightforward cause and effect system which directly connects mode of influence with the final policy outcome.

### 2.1.3 The tertiary level

The tertiary level of the model is established through the use of case studies, combining empirical data with related literature. The aim of this level of the AIF is to examine the

interrelationships and interdependencies, between actors, modes and influence, which are at play within the national policy decision-making process. The result of all the intermediate influences on the policy outcome will be evaluated. It aims to provide a framework by which any barriers or differential access to non-state actors due to the activity of others can be assessed. Although this level of the framework will focus on the national policy process it will not and indeed cannot, exclude influence from the wider European and International political contexts.

### **3 Approach and context**

The AIF described above has been applied to the consultation process of the UK's Sustainable Development Strategy. The Government referred to this as the 'taking it on' process. The qualitative empirical data gathered has been analysed, identifying patterns of behaviour, both reported and observed and discursive formation employing discourse analysis. The data sources are complementary and allow for triangulation providing for a robust final analysis.

The three data sets are:

- Non-participant observations were undertaken at meetings/events included in the 'taking it on' process. In total five events were attended, from regional events to issue-centred events. Marginal observation allowed the researcher to remain independent of the subject and have limited effect on the group dynamic. This is key in an investigation of power relationships and subsequent influence. Observation of this kind provides primary data which has not been exposed to prior interpretation. This is particularly beneficial as all the actors involved in the policy process will have their own set of agendas, which will affect the way they perceive the actions of others.
- A selection of documents relating to the 'taking it on' consultation process were analysed, with the aim of identifying which actors had responded to the consultation exercise; to investigate how the details of the events had been translated into the formal responds documents and to identify the dominate discursive formations. To this end regional consultation documents, individual and organisational responses to DEFRA and internet sources were examined.
- Further data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews with a selection of actors representing government (central and regional), NGOs and business; ten interviews have been conducted. Interviewees were selected initially that were known to have been involved in the 'taking it on' process, with subsequent interviewees being identified through the snow-balling technique.

#### *3.1 The consultation process*

The current UK approach to sustainable development is one of interagency. The lead government department is the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), with particular leadership coming from the Sustainable Development Unit. All government departments are responsible for integrating sustainable development into their practices and policies. The UK governance structure has a further level of detail,

accounting for devolution of certain decision-making aspects to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and increasing emphasis on regionalisation in England. The interagency government approach is located in a wider governance context, one which is multiactor and complex in nature. In their discussion of environmental policy Barry and Paterson (2004, p.777) describes this system as a “loose policy coalitions centred around senior civil service, policy entrepreneurs such as those in PIU, some key industries and elite environmental NGOs such as Green Alliance and Forum for the Future”. The structure and relationships within this governance configuration are vital in the understanding the influence occurring within decision making. As an approach to sustainable development the Government addresses both policy and practice, the primary focus in this research being policy and related decision-making. Within this context the UK Government employs the national sustainable development strategy as an overarching framework under which specific issues-driven policies are produced. The production of issue-specific policies reflects and is often driven by, the formation of issue-specific policy groups, such as those outlined by Barry and Paterson. These groups exist in a number of guises such as: task forces, roundtable groups and working groups.

The consultation process, underpinning the review of ‘A better quality of life’, included a number of stages, commencing with an initial ‘fact finding’ exercise ‘Where next for the UK on Sustainable Development?’ This consisted of an online forum, written consultation and a subsequent one-day seminar, with the aim of identifying the main priorities to be focused upon within the review (see UNED-UK Committee, 2003).

The primary consultation exercise, ‘taking it on: developing UK sustainable development strategy together’, was launched in April 2004. The ‘taking it on’ process consisted broadly of four approaches (DEFRA, 2005a):

- 1 Circulation and request for comment on one main consultation paper, which included specific questions to be considered by stakeholders, this document was sent out to 1735 invited participants as well as being openly available on the internet.
- 2 Online consultation consisting of; a virtual panel for invited participants and a general access space.
- 3 Organised events and meetings, including one meeting in each devolved administration and English Region (9). In addition, to regional meetings issue and actor specific (themed) meetings were also held, made up of 9 events which encompassed 23 workshops, with six workshops being organised with local authorities and local strategic partnerships.
- 4 Informal dialogue and submission of opinion.

The actors involved in this consultation process fall into the following categories; business, professional associations and trade unions, local authorities and local strategic partnerships, academic, non-governmental organisations, community and voluntary groups and government and other public bodies.

The circulated consultation paper, ‘taking it on: developing UK sustainable development strategy together’. A consultation was based around four main priority areas (DEFRA, 2004, p.19):



- climate change and energy
- sustainable consumption, production and use of natural resources
- environment and social justice and
- helping communities to help themselves.

The document also sets out that “to make progress in these areas we (the Government), and others need to take action to”;

“help change behaviour; take sustainable development internationally and in Europe; get the structures and tools right so that we have the institutional capacity and leadership in the UK from the national to the local level; and increase the business contribution to achieving sustainable development” (DEFRA, 2004, p.19).

These priority areas provided some degree of structure for the related workshops and events. In addition, as a basic requirement the ‘taking it on’ process had to follow the Government’s criteria for public consultation.

To understand the influence of the process of consultation on decision making it is important to review the format of the workshops and events. Each English Region was asked to hold a regional dialogue event by DEFRA. Although suggestions for the format of the event were supplied, each region had the power to conduct the event as it wished. All events attended, to differing degrees, were multistakeholder, however, the format of the events varied. A number of the events were based loosely along the same structure, with key regional institutions/individuals presenting keynote addresses; this was followed by breakout sessions for the discussion of specific issues. At one meeting these issues were identified in the earlier session by the audience and did not necessarily mirror those set out in the consultation document. Others followed the consultation document, in one meeting it was a mixture of the two approaches. One English Region held quite a different style of event. Prior to the event delegates were asked to submit questions which could be put to a panel, these were then reviewed and a limited number were tabled to a panel, of regional representations, including large business. This question and answer approach was accompanied by an online survey. Subsequent to the events each region produced a consultation report which was supplied to DEFRA for consideration. Themed workshops often worked along the same lines as the regional events. The focus of the themed events included: business engagement, the ‘prosperity objective’, behaviour change, international dimensions and community development. These events were run both by government departments and other groups such as NGOs and government sponsored groups. Again, as with the regional events reports reflecting the discussions were produced for consultation purposes. An important consideration, from a multiactor analysis perspective is that the majority of the delegates at these regional events and indeed the issue specific events were selected and invited directly by the organisers. Although the meetings were open, it seemed few delegates had ‘approached’ the organisers for places.

The ‘taking it on’ process fed into the production of the 2005 UK Government’s sustainable development strategy: ‘securing the future, delivering UK sustainable development strategy’ and an overarching strategic framework ‘one future – different paths. The UK’s shared framework for sustainable development’ (DEFRA, 2005b). The framework provides a vision for sustainable development to 2020.

#### 4 Preliminary findings: influence within a multiactor consultation – ‘taking it on’

The AIF has been employed as a mechanism to evaluate the influences at play in the production of the UK national sustainable development strategy. The findings are presented in the context of the AIF, outlining the secondary level modes and intermediate influence at play with explicit consideration of dominant themes and discursive formations.

##### 4.1 Political context: ‘organising in’ influence

The political context discussed here is that of the production of the ‘*securing the future*’ Strategy. The data indicates that the political context itself is creating and is subject to intermediate influence. As discussed earlier each English Region designed individual consultation event, with the aim the events would reflect the differences which occur between the regions. In theory this is a good approach to adopt, as each region does have slightly difference needs and aspirations and it ensures regional ownership. However, in practice some approaches clearly operated more efficiently than others, in terms of collating the issues raised by the different stakeholders in the region. This is not a reflection of the organisation of the events but of the overall approach adopted. The events which had a more open-forum type approach with facilitators/note-takers appear to have generated much more discussion and subsequently more agreement in the identification of the priority issues, such as, climate change or sustainable communities. Some delegates did express the view that although these discussions were interesting and valid they had limited regional focus and in some cases were dominated by a limited number of individuals. In contrast when time and space was limited, for example in the ‘selected question’ approach, a limited number of issues were discussed and there was little consensus evident regarding the subsequent final response. This was a result of the reduced time frame and the prior selection of questions; these reservations were reflected in the consultation response produced by the region itself;

“... in view of the effort afforded to the task by project partners, and the relatively high expectations, the average response for a consultation of this nature was disappointing. Of particular note was the limited engagement of the private and community sectors. The lack of smaller businesses in particular reinforces the findings for the survey carried out as part of the AfS [Action for Sustainability] consultation process.... A number of lessons have been learned about the way the engagement took place, including:

- The venue....
- The consultation timetable as a whole was too short....
- Efforts were made to engage LSPs [Local Strategic Partnerships ] and other partnerships and some representatives did respond....
- There was insufficient resource or time to develop dedicated surveys or other consultation mechanisms to meet the needs of a variety of audiences....”  
(Sustainability Northwest, 2004, pp.9–10).

An approach such as prior selections of questions could lead to the intermediate influences of accepted discourse; non-decision-making; policy preference and mobilisations of bias. The use of a selected panel in itself creates similar intermediate influences and allows individual and organisations to become accepted insiders resulting

in two-way intermediate influences of status and leadership. The use of keynote addresses also leads to such influences and it can be seen from the choice of panel members and speakers that large business representatives were often in this position, alongside regional and government representatives.

A number of regional and themed events were organised and run by professional consultants. From a time-resource perspective this was seen by some regional Government Offices as a positive approach. However, some delegates felt that the agenda supported by these individuals was disproportionately represented in discussion and documentation. The issue of agenda-setting and mobilisation of bias has also been identified on some occasions through the use of facilitators in workshop sessions. For example, a facilitator from a larger corporate organisation on a number of occasions brought the discussion back to issues faced and addressed by his own corporation. Furthermore, the same facilitator began the workshop session with a monologue relating to the role of business in this agenda and their lack of representation at that regional event. This raises the question of representation, as stated earlier the delegates invited were drawn up by the organising Government Office (or commissioned organisation). On a number of occasions, at different events, it was stated that the private sector was under represented. In addition, a more limited number of concerns were expressed stating that the voluntary sector has little voice, particular the smaller regional groups.

#### *4.2 Business as a specific actor*

In addition to open regional events, business focused events were also held. The Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) hosted an event at the beginning of the 'taking it on' process, the aim being to engage business more in the consultation process. In a similar way Government Office London organised a business breakfast focusing specifically on climate change. The organisers stated that this approach was taken for two reasons; business does not generally attend full day events and climate change is a focused issue that businesses understand and recognise as a direct impact on their operations. Government officials see the direct involvement of business in 'taking it on' as limited. However this research shows that the business community, particularly MNCs have indirect influence. Before discussing more tacit forms of influence it is useful to address why business involvement was limited. One reason is the majority of business, including MNCs, do not feel that the strategy is of sufficient relevance to their organisations to warrant their direct involvement in the consultation process. This is reinforced by a statement by a Government Official: "its [the Strategy] not specific enough yet for them to see what this will mean for them and that's to be expected from a very high level strategy". Interviews with both MNCs and government departments also indicated that the increased number of actors involved in the meetings partly resulted in the limited direct involvement of business. On one occasion the business representatives were so out number by NGOs that the business individuals felt unable to express their views. The following excerpt is taken from an internal memo of a large MNC relating to this issue:

"attendees largely from NGO community, 40 organisations were invited, 30 turned up only 3 organisations representatives from industry. There doesn't seem to be any process by which industry can sensibly contribute to this debate other than by one-to one meetings or by feedback seminars clearly aimed at the business community. It quickly became apparent that it wasn't the forum to express industry views."

This response not only has implications for the ‘taking it on’ process it also has wider implications for transparency in decision making and the assessment of the modes of influence. The significance of the role of NGOs in this specific decision-making process was further highlighted in interviews with government and business representatives, who when asked which groups had the most influence in the ‘taking it on’ process responded the NGO groups. On further evaluation it appears that the larger NGOs, such as, Friends of the Earth, have more experience with the subject and can articulate their viewpoint more efficiently than other actors. However, in discussions on how these groups influence the process the interview data suggests that it is primarily through direct modes of influence such as responses to the consultation, advisory committees and lobbying, rather than tacit modes of influence.

Notwithstanding businesses limited involvement in the formal consultation process, modes of influence outside the boundaries this process were at play. Cross-departmental influence occurred primarily as a result of the interdepartmental approach to sustainable development, both championed and employed by the UK government. Government officials from various departments stated that business influence comes through their relationship with the DTI. In interviews with DTI officials the following modes of influence have been identified as taking place in terms of sustainable development:

- ad hoc, informal conversations between individuals
- trade association lobbying
- speakers at events, by both government and business
- production of briefing papers
- secondments, however this is limited.

Although these influences are discussed in general sustainable development terms, they play a part in setting the agenda in which the national strategy has been developed. The importance of discourse and discursive formation are key in this context and in the evaluation of business influence (this is discussed further below).

The formal aspects of the ‘taking it on’ consultation process was seen as the dominate vehicle through which actors, including business could influence the final national sustainable development strategy. However, the data suggests that even within a bounded consultation approach the mode of influence available to the various actors was much wider than direct involvement.

#### *4.3 Representation versus influence*

Although the numbers of responses and consultees can be assessed it is important to recognise that this does not necessarily automatically relate to influence on the policy outcome; in this case the final strategy. This position is highlighted in the Government’s consultation review with reference to written responses.

“Whilst it is clearly incumbent on the Department [DEFRA] to consider all responses fully, it would be unusual not to accord somewhat greater importance to responses from organisations with particular expertise, influence or representativeness. Defra has indeed done this, at least informally, but it has also taken notice of any innovative suggestions from any source” (DEFRA, 2005a, p.26).

Here the influence of actors on the policy decision-making process external to the boundaries of the formal consultation exercise can be seen. In such a situation a number of the modes of influences and intermediate influence are evident. The effect of lobbying or a role in an advisory committee by an actor, either an NGO or business, creates a position of accepted insider status; this can subsequently be translated into agenda-setting, through perceived power.

In contrast the online general access consultation was non-attributable and responses were dealt with by a user number rather than a name. The aim of this approach was to “enable online participants to say what they wanted incognito, possible outside their organisational view, and was anticipated to encourage full participation and ensure equality of responses (i.e. with no weighting of response)” (DEFRA 2005a, p17). In this situation some of the influences outlined above did not occur. However, this was seen by some actors to give disproportionate importance to the written consultation, which was attributable, creating a less than transparent process. For this reason it is more difficult to ascertain the modes of influence and resulting intermediate influence. More investigation is required in this area; however, documentation reviewed suggests that although reoccurring themes are taken from the online consultation, more weight is given to those written responses from recognised organisations or individuals. The consultation has been described in a Government document as ‘not being a referendum’ (DEFRA 2005a), with importance and representativeness of specific response needing to be taken into account.

#### *4.4 Policy outcome: the final stages*

More tacit forms of influence exist at the final stages of the sustainable development strategy consultation process. To compile the final document, small working groups of civil servants produced short reports on specific key issues for the Strategy. These reports were subsequently presented to a high level programme board, consisting of range of senior officials, with the remit to generate a first draft of the strategy. At this point in the process influence outside the formal consultation period could occur, for example, cross-issue influence, clash of ministerial power, mobilisation of power and anticipated reaction. These intermediate influences result from the exercise of modes of influence by non-state actors that included informal communication, lobbying and more tacit forms such as agenda-setting and perceived power. Due to the importance and timing of this stage in the process this type influence can be considered to impact on the policy outcome.

As outlined previously the policy outcome; the ‘securing the future’ document is not a static end point. An example of the way in which influence continues is evident through the establishing of the Sustainable Procurement Taskforce. The taskforce is a business-led group and is to be chaired by Sir Neville Simms who is associated with a number of MNCs.

#### *4.5 Dominant themes and discursive formation*

Influence, therefore, exists both within the formal bounded consultation process, external to these boundaries and tacitly in and outside the formal process. The use of discourse allows the framework to incorporate such different modes of influences. As no actor exists within isolation in the formal process it is vital that modes of tacit

influence are addressed in the assessment of influence in policy decision-making. A useful starting point is to outline the main themes debated as part of the 'taking it on' process, which can be linked with discursive formation. One of the challenges here is to deconstruct the relationship; has discourse created the main themes or have the main themes led to the dominant discursive formations. In general there was broad agreement that the priority areas outlined by the Government were correct and appropriate. However, a number of the actors raised concerns regarding the continued use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary indicator for sustainable growth. Many respondents felt this continued emphasis on economics as opposed to an integrated view of sustainability undermined the ethos of sustainable development and perpetuated the conflict between environmental and social well-being and economic growth. This reflected a wider discourse which has been occurring both inside and external to the 'taking it on' process. However, this discourse is not evident in the Government's consultation documents. More notably GDP remains within the final strategy as an indicator for economic growth and although the wording of guiding principle has changed slightly there is no reference to the question of redefining sustainable economic growth.

The 'taking it on' process incorporated a number of consultation themes; the majority of which represented crosscutting ideas and were discussed within the context of the priority issues of the strategy and sustainable development more generally. These themes included; implementation, less rhetoric and more action and, leadership and partnership. The dominant themes given most significance within the consultation have been selected for more investigation. To this end the discursive formation relating to language, business contribution and innovation were examined further. Sustainable development has been a contested issue for a number of years and there has been much debate in search of a perfect one-size fits all definition. There now seems to be two stances on this issue; that policy makers and individuals should be pragmatic and take action based on the current understanding and agreement and other that either consensus needs to be reached on the definition of sustainable development or indeed a new term is required. Examining the effects of the latter, the need for a firm definition, in this context, leads to two outcomes; the decision-making process is delayed, which in the long-term creates non-decision-making. Secondly, the emphasis on language allows certain discourse to become more prominent than others. This is highlighted in the examples from consultees/interviewees given below:

"Sustainable development should be replaced by sustainable economies"  
(Consultee at a regional event).

"Sustainable communities should replace sustainable development" (Consultee at a regional event).

"CSR is the same as Sustainable development. Quality of life is too soft"  
(Chair of a session during a regional event).

The significance of this use of language is highlighted in one of the regional responses submitted to Government. In a discussion of the explanation of sustainable development the respondent stated that:

"This is a significant challenge as even within the field of people who court sustainability as a concept, particularly in the business sector, generally fail to use the concept in its true meaning" (Levett-Therivel, 2004).

Both at the specific business related event and the majority of the regional events, there is an overarching business-focused discourse present. One Government department communicated the message that business was needed to help them put pressure on central Government to raise the expectation of what can be achieved under sustainable development. The tacit influence of business was also evident at a number of the regional events. Even in a situation when business, particularly large corporations were absent from the events, the apparent discourse demonstrated an assumption that business is a leader, in particular in relation to the implementation of sustainable development and that business understand the situation more. It is noteworthy that on a number of occasions the discussion reverted to a business perspective, using the language of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), again in the absence of business. One delegate at a regional event stated that ‘business understand more’. This discourse can also be identified in the emphasis placed on business in the ‘taking it on’ consultation document. The document includes specific consultation questions relating to the involvement of business, however, this is not the case for any other non-state actor. In addition there is a section entitled ‘The Business Contribution to Sustainable Development’, the text in this section includes the following:

“The involvement and performance if business is critical to delivering environmental, social and economic goals. Business investment, enterprise and trading are essential in creating the wealth to tackle poverty and other social challenges at home and abroad. Government has an important role to play through active economic, social and environmental policies that support or stimulate action. But *ultimately it is the action taken by businesses themselves* that will deliver a supply of products and services that are clean, resource-efficient and fair to employees and communities” (DEFRA, 2004, p.34, emphasis added).

The business-orientated discursive formations leads to intermediate influences, such as, preference shaping, agenda-setting and most obviously accepted discourse. It creates a situation where business, through little, in some cases no direct activity of their own take on leadership and accepted insider roles.

The importance of innovation further extends the business-orientated discourse and was outlined both in consultation meetings and consultation responses.

“Rewarding innovative solutions would encourage more sustainable solutions to be proposed” (Written response within ‘Taking it on’).

“Government should provide incentives for business to innovate” (Written response within ‘taking it on’).

“..business is keen to ensure continued emphasis on creating the right conditions for wealth creation alongside the social and environmental goals. This element remains critical to any strategy as it provides the means by which innovative solutions to difficult sustainability challenges are rewarded...” (Written response within ‘taking it on’).

The role of business, through the market, in innovation for sustainable development is evident throughout the final strategy document ‘securing the future’. The Prime Minister’s forward includes the statement:

“It involves channelling the power of business by stimulating the market to innovate and to produce cost effective and sustainable options for all purchasers” (DEFRA, 2005b, p.4).

A small selection of the discursive themes present in the 'taking it on' process which can be traced through to the 'securing the future' document have been highlighted. The link with influence through agenda-setting and non-decision-making is becoming evident and this can be linked to the model of influence.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

The AIF is beginning to illustrate the complex interrelationship between mode of influence and intermediate influence within the decision-making process associated with the 'securing the future' strategy. The political context of both national and specific policy levels is key in the examination of mode of influence available to state and non-state actors. However, this cannot be carried out in isolation when focusing on a specific policy decision-making context. The modes of influence and subsequent intermediate influence which exist outside this process cannot be ignored, to this end, the role of the discourse is key.

The perceived power of MNCs and the wider business community has led to other non-state actors anticipating reactions and adopting accepted discourse. Cross-government departmental influence is also strong, primarily due to the nature of sustainable development as an interagency policy. Interestingly, although engagement by business, in the formal consultation maybe more limited than other actors, influence still occurs through tacit means and through direct influence on other government departments outside this specific policy decision-making arena. The increased emphasis on CSR and the consideration by non-state actors as this being the only possible business contribution to sustainable development through business-orientated discourse demonstrates the influence of agenda-setting and the role of non-decisions. A high level of tacit influence at play in the consultation events themselves and in the responses returned to DEFRA for consideration, resulted in influence being exerted outside the formal consultation process. It is clear that engagement and influence are two separate issues in a situation where Government officials express concern about the level of business engagement when the evidence suggests a high level of influence exists, all be it more tacit than direct.

The case study of the 'taking it on' consultation process suggests that the use of facilitators in consultation meetings should be done so with caution; with an awareness of the influence they have and selection should be completed with due care and attention. It is important that policy makers are aware of all of the modes of influence at play in the decision-making process, employing the AIF would provide a more systematic approach for policy makers to achieve this objective. Moreover it is vital that tacit influence of actors is recognised, by policy makers, against the same significance afforded formal direct influence.

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