

We live in interesting if challenging times. The future of the British economy, its people and places is finely balanced. Siren voices focus on the risks ahead. Others focus on the achievements made, despite the difficulties of the recent years. The debate is not settled. The facts and the theories are still emerging. However, one thing is certain. The economic future of the UK is intimately tied up with the prospects and futures of its leading city regions. If they don't work, the economy won't work and we won't work. The Brexit decision has made the issues more not less important. The UK is engaged in a crucial policy debate about city regions, their governance and economic performance. This article identifies some key evidence about about the performance, policies and prospects of UK cities in a comparative context, based upon a range studies I have undertaken during the past three decades.

It charts the renaissance of city regions as the drivers of national economies, showing how in the UK we have won the intellectual but not yet the policy battle about the importance of city regions. It reviews the evidence about the performance of UK cities in a European context. It argues that the UK's more centralised governmental, institutional, and financial system is a key dimension of the underperformance of its cities and that it must decentralise decision making and deconcentrate investment if we want a higher performing national economy.

The article looks at the impact of the recession upon the UK's cities and their place in the international urban hierarchy. It shows the established urban hierarchy in the UK was marginally challenged by the boom but has been reasserted during the recession and many northern city-regions are slipping, although a set of powerful group of Celtic city-regions in the devolved administrations have performed very strongly. Since London and the devolved administrations have significant policy advantages over northern England, it argues the UK needs an informed debate about the economic contribution of UK city-regions and public and private sector investment to rebalance our national economy and compete internationally.

Globally London and Edinburgh consolidated their position in the top 20 percent of European city-regions 2000-10. The other UK city-regions fell down the rankings but remain in the middle group in Europe as a whole. While they rank above most city-regions in Developing Asia-Pacific and Latin American countries, they lag North American city-regions by a distance and, as a group, perform worse than those in the rest of Western Europe. Similar patterns during the boom and recession can be found in Europe. The gains that investment achieved were obvious - if uneven. And all this is being played out in a global context in which city-regions in countries such as China are growing rapidly with the weight of global economic power shifting accordingly.

The article examines the specific experience of Liverpool city region over thirty years as an exemplar of urban decline and partial renaissance in the UK. It underlines the uneven nature of Liverpool's partial renaissance and the gaps between its more and less successful places and people – a challenge which is increasingly faced and must be addressed across all city regions.

Finally, it identifies some wider policy messages for UK government in the light of its focus upon devolution, city regions, elected city regional Mayors and the Northern Powerhouse. It argues that the rewards of creating successful city regions could be high for the UK. But the risks of not doing so could be even higher. No cities, no civilisation - the bible tells us. But no successful city regions, no successful nations.