



Public-private partnerships in a Swedish rural context - A policy tool for the authorities to achieve sustainable rural development?



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ABSTRACT

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have become a popular tool for governing rural development in a European context. PPPs are often presented as significant solutions for increasing both the effectiveness (problem-solving capacity) and the legitimacy of sustainable rural governance in terms of participation and accountability. In Sweden, where PPPs have played a marginal role, due to the EU cohesion policy they are now gaining ground as a model for the governance and management of natural resources in rural areas. Previous research shows that the state remains crucial in governing the process of governance through partnerships, especially in a rural as opposed to an urban context, where the state plays an ongoing role in initiating, structuring, financing and regulating partnerships. Is this an example of the state trying to counterbalance the increased power of the private sector, or the opposite – that is, an attempt to reduce social exclusion and increase participation by promoting the interest of private actors in local development processes? Our study examines the critical role of the state in these partnerships. We focus on authorities in charge of natural resource management and rural development and assess the enabling role of the authorities in rural areas with a weak or dispersed private sector. Empirical data is collected via group interviews at a workshop in which key representatives from the authorities participated. We identify a number of potential challenges associated to PPPs in a rural context, and in light of this we clarify how the authorities engage in different types of partnership arrangements, as well as their capacity to facilitate these partnerships in attempt to enhance sustainable rural development.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the 1992 Rio Summit, and even more strongly after the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, public-private partnerships (PPPs) have been pursued as an important tool by which to contribute to sustainable development activities. In their generic form PPPs can be defined as: *'collaborative arrangements in which actors from two or more spheres of society (state, market and/or civil) are involved in a non-hierarchical process, and through which these actors strive for a sustainability goal'* (Van Huijstee et al., 2007: 77), or as Long and Arnold (1995: 6) define environmental partnerships: *'voluntary, jointly-defined activities and decision-making processes among corporate, non-profit, and agency organizations that aim to improve environmental quality or natural resource utilization'*. Other concepts, such as 'public-policy networks', 'multi-sectoral networks',

or 'multi-stakeholder networks', are frequently used to define the same phenomenon (Streck, 2002; Benner et al., 2004; Bäckstrand, 2006). Although PPPs are voluntary agreements between state and non-state actors, they are based on a set of norms and rules and involve policymaking and the delivery of public goods, which distinguishes them from occasional interactions between public and private sectors or lobbying (Streck, 2002).

The concept of partnerships originates in the idea that government (alone) fails to deliver collective goods such as sustainable development and that there is a need to look for support from other sectors of society. Through a partnering process it is assumed that the public and private sectors can benefit by combining their know-how and expertise but also finances and other resources, to deliver collective goods in a more efficient way. As such, PPPs are seen as an alternative to privatization (Hodge and Greve, 2007). On the international and global level, PPPs have been promoted as an alternative to the lack of effective global governance arrangements and have as such merged with the literature and ideas on collaborative governance, good governance, and meta-governance (Mol, 2007; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009; Christopoulos et al., 2012).

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Furthermore, PPPs are used in many policy areas, including education, environment, healthcare, energy, infrastructure, and sustainable development (LaFrance and Lehmann, 2005). They also appear in a wide variety of contexts (there are global, transnational, national, sub-national, regional and local-level partnerships), which makes it difficult to grasp the full significance of the partnership concept, particularly since it is used by scholars from different fields such as organizational theory, policy science, sociology and political science, focusing on different aspects of the partnership phenomenon and addressing quite distinct research questions (Geddes, 1998; Selsky and Parker, 2005; Van Huijstee et al., 2007). However, from a sustainability perspective, PPPs are supposed to be a tool by which to enhance sustainable development, by reconciling seemingly opposing policy objectives, such as policies for improving rural development, while at the same time preserving natural resources, such as biodiversity, forests, fish and water resources (Glasbergen, 2011a).

Consequently, in a Swedish context, PPPs are defined as an important tool for achieving sustainable rural development through *the integration of rural perspectives* as a natural element of all policy areas (Landsbygdsstrategin, Skr 2008/09:167). The role of the state, or more specifically authorities responsible for rural development or the natural resources upon which rural development is based, and regional and local government thus becomes crucial in governing the process of sustainable rural development through partnerships. This is confirmed by earlier research where the state has been shown to have a persistent role in initiating, structuring, financing and regulating partnerships, especially in rural as opposed to urban contexts (Edwards et al., 2001; Bell and Park, 2006; Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Shucksmith, 2010; Glasbergen, 2011b; Baker and Eckerberg, 2014). It is well known, however, that while 'win-win' opportunities may exist, it is at the same time often difficult to achieve (environmental) policy integration in practice (Söderberg and Eckerberg, 2013).

The objective of this explorative study is to examine the critical role of the state in partnerships for sustainable rural development on the regional and local level in Sweden. We focus solely on authorities in charge of natural resource management and rural development, and on how partnerships are used and/or facilitated by different governmental authorities in a rural context, that is, how officials perceive the role of the state in the partnerships. Is PPPs perceived as a promising policy tool for enhancing sustainable rural development by the authorities?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Public-private partnerships

Partnerships are increasingly used for the purpose of sustainability governance internationally (Hemmati, 2002; Bovaird, 2004; Andonova, 2010; Glasbergen, 2011a). Although the concept of PPP does not have a uniform definition, most definitions share some common features (Peters, 1998; Glasbergen et al., 2007). Firstly, they all imply a voluntary or agreed collaboration between at least one state and one non-state actor (however, the range of actors differs between different types of PPPs). Secondly, the partnership should be a formalized long-term commitment or at a minimum a mutual commitment to carry out a collaboration (Bovaird, 2004) in which the partners' contributions complement each other in a way that enables them to achieve their goals more efficiently within the given PPP than on their own. See Fig. 1 for an illustration of the synergy and added value of an idealized partnership. A third defining feature of PPPs is that the partners are supposed to share resources, risks and rewards. In this respect shared ownership and equal responsibilities are often mentioned in the literature (Kwak

et al., 2009). Fourth, most PPPs are arranged with the aim of providing some form of public service/asset (Khanom, 2010).

There have been several attempts to sort and categorize different forms of PPPs in extensive literature reviews (see Van Huijstee et al., 2007; Glasbergen et al., 2007; Kwak et al., 2009). Empirical assessments show that PPPs can take a wide range of forms and have different purposes, varying from serving a regulative function, playing a methodological, supportive and supervisory role, to functioning as a knowledge and communication centre. In some cases PPPs are seen as a method by which to govern and/or manage towards specific objectives. In other cases are PPPs described as an institutional arrangement for financial cooperation (a way for the state to gain access to private funding/venture capital), a development strategy, a tool for solving problems, conflicts and providing community amenities, an arrangement for crisis management and knowledge transfer, or a way to modernize the public sector.

Glasbergen (2012) categorizes partnerships as being either market-oriented or policy-oriented, while Van Huijstee et al. (2007) argue that partnerships could be defined as falling into either a market, a policy or a social role. In the market role, partnerships are supposed to strengthen markets and bolster institutional effectiveness; the policy role might include agenda-setting and policy development; while the social role might include giving a voice to unrecognized groups. Weihe (2006) classifies PPPs into five categories, based on their approach: local regeneration, policy, infrastructure, development and governance. The local regeneration and the policy approaches are quite similar, both involving a wide definition of the PPP concept that covers changes in policies on environment, economic renewal, development, and institutional structure. The difference between the two is that the local-regeneration approach focuses on the local level while the policy approach focuses on the national level. The third approach, the infrastructure approach, covers private and public sector cooperation to create and maintain infrastructure. The fourth approach, the development approach, concentrates on the development of infrastructure in developing countries where corruption, social deprivation, and global disasters are present. The last approach, the governance approach, does not specify any context or policy as it emphasizes the organizational and management sides, as well as new ways of cooperation and governing.

These attempts to sort and categorize PPPs mainly consider PPPs in a global or national context, and their applicability to partnerships in rural contexts is not elaborated on to any great extent (local regeneration is mainly studied in a urban context – see Stoker, 1998; Beauregard, 1998 and Bovaird, 2004); accordingly, most theoretical frameworks and models are developed in a global and/or national context and are rarely related to natural resource management in rural contexts. To what extent they are also applicable on a regional and local level in a rural context needs to be further elaborated. Westholm et al. (1999:15) state: 'For research purposes the partnerships approach needs a more precise and theoretical definition', and Furmankiewicz et al. (2010: 68) point to the continued need to examine the strategies, mentalities and behaviours of 'government' at the supra-local level in the study of rural governance and partnerships, and to be aware of the different political and geographical contexts in which partnership governance is practised. This call for more in-depth studies on the role of government justifies the explicit focus on authorities in a rural context in this study.

From this brief overview of earlier research, it is obvious that PPPs can take different forms depending on a) objectives, b) the actors involved, and c) the power to make or influence decisions, which in turn will affect the role of the state as well as the outcome of the PPP in terms of their effectiveness, legitimacy, ability to

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