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.

Keywords:
Public-private partnership, rural context, agencies/authorities, rural development, Sweden

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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; Backstrand, 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).
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 (Landsbygdstrategin, Skr 2008:09/167). The role of the state, or more specifically authorities responsible for rural development, is emphasized, role and function are crucial in rural development, 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 manage towards specific objectives. 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 voice to unrecognized groups. 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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