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

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A B S T R A C T

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).
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, and the natural resource 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 Eckberg, 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 Eckberg, 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 regulatory 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. Weihle (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
achieve and develop consensus, and the potential inherent in the pooling of resources (human, material and financial) (Van Huijstee et al., 2007). A generic form of analytical framework building on these features (a–c) would therefore seem to be more appropriate for an empirical study of partnerships and the actors—in our case responsible key authorities' roles in partnerships promoting sustainable rural development.

### 2.2. The objectives of partnerships

According to Labonne (1998) public-private interaction is crucial to the issue of long-term supply-side commodity exploitation and management. Through PPPs the public and private sectors can advance the objectives of sustainable development, which are inherent in the development and management of natural resources—that is, how to safeguard the environment for future generations, while developing natural resources for productive purposes to improve regional and local welfare. In these situations, where partnerships are motivated by social and environmental concerns, the partnership itself might be part of the goal (Andonova, 2010; Glasbergen, 2011a). Partnerships may thus serve various purposes and be involved in various activities and processes, and thus fulfill a number of distinct and specific objectives, from policy design to natural resource management (Bovaird, 2004). On the one hand, partnerships could be established to facilitate and promote rural development through the setting up of development strategies, the strengthening of regional/local competitiveness and identity, the promotion of innovation, and cluster benefits (Porter, 1990; Andonova, 2010). They could also be established to coordinate activities territorially while gathering different types of competence and resources, that is, LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale meaning ‘Links between the rural economy and development actions’) and FLAG (Fisheries Local Action Group) (Moseley, 2003). On the other hand, partnerships could be established to actively take part in policy implementation, adapting overarching policy objectives to the regional/local level or engaging in monitoring activities. PPPs can also provide an arena for mitigating conflicting interests, in an attempt to reconcile seemingly opposing policy objectives and find win–win solutions and/or acceptable trade-offs between different stakeholders. In this respect it is interesting to study what capacity and legitimacy different types of PPPs have when it comes to the management of conflicts concerning natural resources and rural development. To sum up, partnerships have basically two fundamentally different roles, where the first is to provide the public actors with expertise and local knowledge, and the second to enhance participation or collaboration between sectors and interests often through deliberative means. In the former case a PPP is more of a means to an end while in the latter the partnership per se could be an important part of the objective.

### 2.3. Partners in partnerships (and their interaction)

As mentioned above a PPP is an agreement that involves, in addition to representatives of the state (which is the focus of this study), different sets of private actors, such as representatives of the market and/or various civil society actors. The different actors have joint functions as well as their own particular roles, each contributing to sustainable rural development (see Table 1).

The state plays a critical role in the development and management of PPPs for sustainable rural development. The state includes the government on the national level, regulatory authorities on both the national and the regional levels, and county administrative boards and municipalities on regional and local levels. According to the literature the roles of these public actors are mainly to initiate, structure, finance and regulate partnerships, that is, they provide the authority for the partnership to function and are able to regulate and monitor the partnerships, for example, by regulating business and providing subsidies to encourage certain sectors to get involved. The roles may vary, however, due to the objective of the partnership and what powers are associated with the partnership (Edwards et al., 2001; Shucksmith, 2010; Christopoulos et al., 2012; Baker and Eckerberg, 2014).

Private actors include both profit-making firms and non-profit private organizations (the latter are referred to in the next section as ‘civil-society organizations’), the profit-making actors, referred to here mainly as the ‘market’, being a group of actors that includes companies, entrepreneurs and other business partners (such as investors, service providers, employees, suppliers, and distributors). Their main role is to provide the public partner with expertise and financing in return for permission to conduct an operational venture (Khanom, 2010).

Civil society organizations include non-governmental organizations, grassroots organizations, cooperatives and trade unions, as well as universities, media and independent foundations. They are independent of the state and promote common interests (political,
cultural, social or economic) based on a non-profit, voluntary basis.¹ In partnerships they often play the role of improving accountability on various political levels, monitoring policy implementation using local expertise. However the incentive to participate in partnerships is also based on the opportunities they offer to achieve change by influencing policy design and implementation. This will be elaborated on further in the next section.

2.4. Power in partnerships

In terms of power, a partnership ideally involves both a vertical and a horizontal shift of power (Fernández, 2000). The vertical shift includes a transfer of decision-making power from, for example, the national to the regional and/or local arena (i.e., the redistribution of power among the public actors), while the horizontal shift includes increased policy influence for non-state actors such as corporations, non-governmental organizations, grassroots organizations, cooperatives, etc. (for an in depth study of power relations in partnerships, see Derkenze et al., 2008). In enabling sustainable rural development in Sweden, this implies a shift in power from the state to regional and local authorities in charge of rural development and natural resource management, as well as to the county administrative boards and municipalities. The role of the state in this governance shift is emphasized in meta-governance literature, which stresses the practices and procedures that secure governmental influence, command and control in governance regimes (Kooiman, 2003). However, other public and private actors should have a say in meta-governance as well, since meta-governance ideally should improve decision-making and participation, steering or the coordination of collective action (Kooiman, 2003; Christopoulos et al., 2012). According to the partnership literature, the power or influence of the private actors varies, depending on the objective of the PPP, from an advisory role in the policy design phase to a more inclusive and operational role in implementation/monitoring and evaluation (Long and Arnold, 1995; Lister, 2000). With regard to this, it becomes important to study how authorities in a Swedish rural context invite actors, and on what grounds they are included or excluded in the partnerships since it could affect the effectiveness (problem-solving capacity) representation and legitimacy of the partnerships, not to mention the accountably.

3. Methodology

This is an explorative study that analyzes the extent to which PPPs are an integrated part of the activities of Swedish key authorities that handle issues with relevance for sustainable rural development. Due to the acknowledge role of the state both in theory and in practice and the call for more research we will explicitly focus on how the authorities relate to PPPs, and thus not include the views of the market and/or the civil society organisations actors in this study. To be able to capture the agencies’ activities involving, and views on, PPPs we initiated the workshop ‘Partnership for sustainable rural development’, in Östersund, in the northern Swedish province of Jämtland, in January 2014. Representatives from all the key agencies at national and regional level involved in natural resource management and/or rural development were invited to participate in the workshop. We choose to have the workshop in Jämtland since several of the national authorities are located there, Jämtland is also one of the most sparsely populated rural regions in Sweden. The agencies invited to attend the workshop were: the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (3); the Swedish Forest Agency (3); the Swedish Board of Agriculture (3); the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (2); and the County Administrative Board of Jämtland (5). A total of 16 people were invited, and of them 5 declined owing to work conflicts, while 3 had to cancel at the last minute because of illness. Unfortunately, as a result no-one from Swedish Board of Agriculture participated in the workshop; all of the other agencies, however, had at least one or more representatives at the workshop: the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2); the Swedish Forest Agency (1); the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (1) and the County Administrative Board of Jämtland (4). When we invited the people from the agencies, it was vital that they were able not only to have visions for the future, but also a practical and historical perspective on partnerships (see Appendix A for an overview of the participants).

A telephone interview with a key representative of the Swedish Board of Agriculture was later undertaken to complement the material from the workshop. In this interview, the same questions were discussed as at the workshop and this material has been integrated into the empirical section of the study (Kvale and Brinnkann, 2009). Although the number of participants is relatively small, they represent all the key authorities involved in natural resource management and rural development in Sweden. A small number of participants is also a prerequisite for the methodology to serve the purpose of this study. To explore the authorities’ views on PPPs we chose the format of group interviews since it allowed us to elicit

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perceptions, information, attitudes and ideas from each participant of which possessed experience with the phenomenon under study.

Semi-structured group interviews are a research method in which data are gathered through deliberations by a group of respondents in which a pre-decided subject is discussed (in this case, partnerships for sustainable rural development). In contrast to traditional one-to-one interviews, where the interviewer and the respondent have a discussion, group interviews often also involve discussion among the participants. These dynamic discussions add to the richness of the data as well as the findings of the study (Patton, 2005).

The researchers began the workshop with a general introduction for all participants, who were later divided into two smaller groups (four participants in each group). The group interviews were led by the researchers. There were two parallel group sessions, both of which began with the researchers giving a short introduction that explained what it was hoped the session would result in. The sessions were recorded (in total approximately two hour’s audio files) and later transcribed into verbatim field notes. These field notes constitute the empirical data that are analyzed, interpreted and reported on in this study.

4. Background: the rural context in Sweden

4.1. Authorities responsible for sustainable rural development in Sweden

The typical physical environment and low number of inhabitants are features that unite the rural areas in Sweden, which is what we refer to when we use the term ‘rural context’ in this study. Further, rural development has traditionally not been addressed as a policy field in its own right in Sweden. Since the accession of Sweden to the EU, greater attention has been given to the issue of rural development than was previously the case, and Swedish politics has become increasingly characterized by the move from a focus on regional equalization policy to the creation of competition based on the intrinsic strengths of each region (Landsbygdsstrategin, Skr 2008/09:167). Environmental issues are also important in rural policies. This is explicitly expressed in Sweden’s rural development programme, which has four key strategic objectives for integrating natural resource management and rural development and incorporating underrepresented actors:

- Sustainable development and sustainable use of natural resources
- Promotion of rural, agricultural and forestry enterprise growth, competitiveness and employment, while contributing to the sustainable use of natural resources
- Promotion of knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas
- Inclusion of young people, women and people of foreign or ethnic origin, who are under-represented in the agriculture and forestry sectors

Sustainable rural development is the overall objective of the Swedish governmental strategy for rural areas. Important tools by which to reach these objectives include the regional development programmes (2007–2013) – which includes investments in the form of aid and contributions to rural development – and the establishment of public-private partnerships (Landsbygdsstrategin, Skr 2008/09:167).

The rural development strategy promotes the development and diversification of the rural economy through the sustainable use of rural natural and cultural resources. Relevant authorities have therefore been asked to develop an in-depth strategy to integrate natural and cultural sectors emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to rural development. The rural strategy identifies all the relevant actors, but in this exploratory study we have chosen to focus solely on the authorities that explicitly handle natural resources and rural development. They are, on the national level, in addition to the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth: the Swedish Board of Agriculture, the Swedish Forest Agency and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency; and on the regional level: the County Administrative Boards. All these authorities are supposed to establish different forms of partnerships to include private actors in policy making and/or the implementation of policy objectives.

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), which has a specific mandate to monitor conditions in the environment and progress in environmental policy, is required to develop, coordinate, monitor and evaluate efforts designed to meet Sweden’s environmental objectives, which may involve many agencies. SEPA has established partnerships to carry out local nature conservation projects (LONÅ) as well as partnerships focusing on the governance and management of national parks and wildlife. The Swedish Board of Agriculture is the government’s expert authority in matters of agri-food policy and is responsible for the agricultural and horticultural sectors. Partnerships dealing with this sector are an explicit feature of LEADER and FLAG. The role of the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth is to strengthen regional development and facilitate enterprise and entrepreneurship throughout Sweden, and to coordinate authorities on various levels using instruments such as the structural funds. The Swedish Forest Agency is the national authority in charge of forest-related issues. The agency uses a number of tools to enhance dialogue between important stakeholder groups but can also, on a more formal basis, establish partnerships and nature conservation agreements with individual land owners to protect biodiversity.

On the regional level, the county administrative boards are supposed to coordinate county development in line with goals set in national policy. Partnerships are used as a policy tool in rural development issues and in relation to wildlife management and nature conservation.

5. Empirical findings

5.1. Partnerships—end or means to an end?

Since partnerships may serve various purposes and fulfil a number of distinct and specific objectives (Bovaird, 2004) we specifically asked the representatives from the authorities about the objectives of partnerships from their perspective. The group interviews reveal several reasons for the authorities to establishing partnerships: to achieve legitimacy, to achieve sustainable management and development, to access expert advice or input on policy processes, and to reach consensus or at least coordinate views on certain issues or topics. The Forest Agency, for example, invites stakeholders to discuss processes in order to find a common ground in forest policy development. Partnerships for dialogue and collaboration are also the primary vehicle of economic growth policies, in that they are used to coordinate resources and find win–win solutions. Partnerships are thus seen as a means by which to reach an overarching objective that is established jointly by the actors involved.

This also applies in the cases in which partnerships are seen as a means to enhance legitimacy:

…”to get ahead in environmental policy, to get on with what you want, local acceptance and local participation are needed, otherwise (…) you will run into difficulties. You need both
knowledge and understanding from all the involved actors, regarding predator policy, hunting, wildlife, protected areas, management and everything. We have a common need to achieve goals and interact with each other to get where we want (…) you notice that when the state just barges in and imposes its decisions, it is not accepted. (CAB F)

In these cases partnerships are used as a means to either win stakeholders’ support for overarching objectives or to at least determine why and how policies are to be implemented. They could also be used to co-produce knowledge in order to improve management. The learning aspect of a partnership was particularly emphasized by the representative from the Swedish Board of Agriculture:

… partnerships have always had some kind of added value in that they [the partners] have some type of knowledge and internal communication that does not involve us as the managing authority. (SBA I)

Another reason for the establishment of partnerships is to contribute to sustainable rural development in relation to fishing – for example, through lease agreements, coordination of marketing and the promotion of tourism. Here the objective is twofold – the sustainable governance and management of the fish resource, and rural development through economic development – and it is thus both an end and a means to an end.

However, our study indicates that the authorities often perceive partnerships more as a mean to an end than an end in itself, which can be explained by the fact that the objectives of the partnership often focuses on either management or development. The two aspects are thus rarely integrated in the same partnership. Hence regardless of whether partnerships are to be considered as an end or a means to an end, partnerships are seen as an important tool that can be employed by government authorities to enhance natural resource management or rural development through the involvement of regional and local private actors in the policy process.

5.2. Different types of PPPs and the involved actors

As the previous section indicated, PPPs in a rural context differ in their objectives, which implies that partnerships will take different forms and will involve different sets of actors. The participants in the workshop presented a wide array of PPPs in which they are involved (on different levels – national, regional and local), with the partnerships for the rural development programme – the structural funds, services and the regional partnerships – being explicit examples of PPPs since they are formally labelled ‘partnerships’. LEADER and FLAG are also concrete examples of partnerships, since the involvement of both public and private actors is a prerequisite for obtaining funding. Other forms of collaboration are not explicitly named ‘partnerships’ even if they are described as partnerships by the participants, one concrete example being the relationship between the county administrative board and the reindeer herding communities on the development and management of fishing in the mountain areas (CAB F), and the ‘rural development network’ (Landsbygdsnämnden), which involves representatives from the various LEADER areas and over 100 other actors of relevance for rural development, in collaboration with the Swedish Board of Agriculture (SBA I).

The ‘wildlife management delegations’ are another example of a partnership in which a wide array of public and private actors are engaged. The wildlife management delegations are highly formalized partnerships, in which the actors and what they represent are formally defined: ‘… there is a regulation that stipulates what interests are to be represented’ (CAB E). The management organisation of the world heritage Laponia, Laponiatjuottjudus, is mentioned as another example of a formalized public-private partnership (SEPA B). The ongoing national park process in Sylarna is also put forth by some of the participants as an example of a PPP, since it has generated both the ‘Sylarna Platform’ (Platform Sylarna) and the ‘Mountain Forum’ (Fjällforum) which are partnerships between public and private actors in Jamtland, Sweden, and Norway (CAB G). The latter are voluntary initiated partnerships, while the former, the wildlife management delegations is mandatory in each county.

When it comes to the initiating of the partnerships, it is agreed on by the participants that it is the public actors that often take on the role of inviting the private actors, or even carefully selecting them: ‘… the idea was that we were supposed to form a partnership and they [the non-state actors] were supposed to be involved in it and write the action plan, to anchor the plan. To do this, we selected 20 organizations, including eight municipalities in our region.’ (CAB H). However this attempt to hand-pick a ‘perfect’ partnership could not be realized since the county administrative board do not have the mandate to decide who should be represented on behalf of other agencies (in this case the municipalities). Nonetheless, the authorities state that their task is often to establish partnerships by identifying and inviting actors that are judged as important and representative of local and regional interests. There is however no guarantee that this will provide a representative sample of actors or continuity over time:

Like now, as we are about to embark on the service programme, we want input from all municipalities and entrepreneurs, and various retail chains. We will send it [the invitation] to their info addresses (…) and a lot of people show up. The problem is that when we send our invitation to the next meeting, different people will show up. And then it will be … it will not be the same kind of partnership – no continuity – but at least we will have embedded the questions in a broader group. (CAB G)

Several of the participants at the workshop emphasized the importance of involving the private actors in the initial stages of the processes (i.e., when they develop strategies, write programmes, establish national park policies, etc.) to build ‘local participation’ (SEPA B). In this respect there seems to be low self-reflexiveness among the officials on what actors that are invited and/or uninvited, and what impact their selection will have on the representation in the partnership and its perceived legitimacy among other stakeholders. According to one of the participants, ‘it is important to get those who are engaged, who are passionate about the issues and familiar with the questions. And this is where the representation … it’s not so important whether they have been nominated, it is more important that they have the ambition, that they have views that you can integrate into the work.’ (CAB G). This goes hand in hand with how the authorities define the objectives of the partnerships, but raises issues of both participation or collaboration and legitimacy of such partnerships, since the officials mainly seems to perceive the partnerships as a tool to provide authorities with expertise rather than to enhance participation by reducing social exclusion. Furthermore, in the discussions it became clear that in rural areas, which are often sparsely populated and in which the private sector is relatively weak, it can be problematic to involve and engage the private actors. The structural problems that are found in remote and rural areas are identified as a common problem for partnerships in a rural context if they are required to be ‘representative’, since those involved are usually older middle-aged
men. Women and young people are under-represented groups, and those who actually engage are involved in several groupings (CAB F).

Linked to the problem of representativeness was also mentioned the problem of unequal conditions for participation in the PPPs:

And already there, when it is decided that we should have this LEADER idea with the three sectors without being given any resources, it becomes incredibly strange, because you cannot engage on the same terms with the three sectors. Authorities’ (formally commissioned) engage based on salaries; entrepreneurs are supposed to represent other business in some way while simultaneously running their own business; while the non-profit actors must take a leave of absence from their jobs to be able to participate and pay for their journey. (CAB H)

This is one important aspect that almost all officials touched upon, namely, the fact that public and private actors are on different terms when participating in a partnership. The public actors engage in the partnership as a part of their regular work, while private entrepreneurs such as entrepreneurs and representatives of civil society need to take a day off and may lose income due to their engagement in the partnership.

One solution to this, according to the authorities, would be to engage the municipalities to a higher degree, since the municipalities have double roles: they are perceived as public authorities as well as representatives of civil society, giving the citizens a voice. This makes the municipalities an important part of the partnerships, particularly due to the competence they can bring into the partnerships: ‘The municipalities have an incredibly broad range of skills that are relevant to our work in the Rural Development Programme. They know integration, they know the environment, they know economic and regional growth, they know rural development, they have the planning instrument in their hands – yes, they have all of these components.’ (CAB H). Once again it is the input of expertise rather than increased participation and legitimacy that is emphasised by the participants in our study.

When it comes to the partnerships, the officials stated that they tend to differ, or as one official put it: ‘… public–private–partnerships pertaining to development issues differ very much from those pertaining to management [issues], it’s almost as they are not in the same world’ (CAB E). Which could be one reason to why they seldom are integrated into more holistic partnerships. When the authorities initiate PPPs for the management of natural resources it often implies a partnership with established organizations, such as the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), the Swedish Hunters’ Association and the National Association of Swedish Sami (SSR). When it comes to PPPs for rural development the authorities still turn to the established organizations, but now also invite municipalities, companies and entrepreneurs to a higher degree. The partners involved in the different partnerships are often the same (actors have multiple affiliations), but they are expected to deliver different outcomes and take on different roles and responsibilities depending on if the partnership pertains to management (such as the wildlife management delegation and the national park committees) or to development (LEADER), and contribute different means.

In the wildlife management delegation the issue of representativeness is perceived as being somewhat problematic: ‘There are a lot of competent people who have been chosen to address the issue and do so effectively, but you cannot be sure that their organization or reindeer-herding community or whatever it may be is buying what they think. And then it becomes a problem for the system, when in the end they do not have the confidence of their organization’ (CAB E). According to a representative from SEPA this was also an issue in the establishment of Laponia, in which the agency had to spell out that the actors represented the interest/organization it had its mandate from. Consequently, they had to go back and obtain explicit support for the decisions on a regular basis. This, according to the SEPA official, made the process successful but also prolonged it. The official stressed the lengthy processes that partnerships can entail and the increased costs, but stated that this pays off in the end, in the long run there are benefits such as increased knowledge, understanding, trust and legitimacy:

I tended to focus on the negative aspects of partnerships (…) everything definitely takes much longer. And another thing is that costs. It’s not cheaper to add a local management organization for a World heritage site or a national park that will drive the process, it is more efficient and cheaper if the authority does it, on a national basis. It is the negative aspects. It costs more for conservation, and the same money is supposed to cover everything. So there goes more money to the bureaucracy, or one might say, to the administration. (SEPA B)

Regardless of the type of partnership involved, the state – or in this case the authorities in charge of natural resources and rural development – play an important role as a facilitator. They initiate and invite partners, coordinate and provide financial means, etc. Depending on the type of partnership involved, the relationship between the state and the other actors does vary, however. This will in turn affect the power relations between the involved partners.

5.3. Power relations

One challenging issue that relates to the robustness and sustainability of a partnership is the distribution of power, that is, how different actors are involved in the decision-making process, and what roles the different actors are supposed to have in the partnership (Boivard, 2004). Depending on the objective of the PPP, the role of the private actors ranges from an advisory role during the policy design and policy coordination phases to a more inclusive and operational role during implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The fact that the level of influence differs between the public and private actors was discussed at the workshop, where partnerships with some form of shared decision-making was said to be quite rare; instead, partnerships are often perceived as an arena for support-gathering, discussion and coordination, with the private actors having no formal power. Several PPPs were described as ‘partnerships for discussion’ designed to provide the authorities with guidelines as to how to move forward (CAB H) or as ‘reference groups’ (SBA I).

However, the importance of power is explicitly stressed by several participants: ‘I think political governance, together with power, is something that is really important in partnership’ (CAB E). Yet, this is considered missing in the wildlife management delegation. Initially, the involved partners had very high expectations regarding the potential to influence the decisions to be made. During the first two years, the actors exclaimed on almost every meeting ‘Why are we here, if we cannot make any decisions and we’re not allowed to decide on a direction? What’s the point then?’ (CAB E). The lack of power is also presented as a problem for the Water Council: ‘… there was a lack of power in this Water Council. It was consultative and a place for discussion. Power is indeed a key component for a partnership to work well’ (CAB E). In connection with this discussion on power, another participant pointed out: ‘… my experience of the former rural programme and the partnerships we now have completed, is that when it started, they [the non-state actors] had power. Now, after seven years, that’s no longer the case:
they are fed up, having realized they cannot control it. They are not interested in considering the development as such; nevertheless, they do want to be involved in the decision-making.’ (CAB H).

A partnership may also have different roles and functions at different stages of the policy process:

For example, when we develop programmes we invite the partners, and it may then happen that we invite many different actors. We have, it’s called the Great Partnership in the region, where we invite 70 organizations. But then once the programme is well established, we want another type of partnership focusing on implementation (...) which has a different function … (CAB G)

In sum, the power relations differ depending on the objectives of the partnership, but also on in what phase of the policy process (design, coordination and/or implementation) the partnerships are initiated or are supposed to play a role. This is rarely spelled out clearly, and the authorities seem to have different opinions about the role of private and civil society actors in terms of power. In some cases this seems to cause disputes or at least different expectations about the partnerships, what they can or may accomplish, and what role the state should play when it comes to governing governance in a rural context.

6. Discussion

6.1. The role of the state

The analysis of the objectives, representation and degree of power-sharing of the various types of partnerships established in a Swedish rural context shows that the state plays several roles in these partnerships (cf. Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Baker and Eckerberg, 2014). As shown in Table 1 the authorities’ role is not only regulatory, but also coordinating and facilitating. The authorities are supposed to initiate PPPs, invite actors and provide information and knowledge. However they may also take on a purely managerial role, focusing on the implementation and evaluation of policy in collaboration with partners responsible for accountability. Although not straightforward, there seems to be a difference between PPPs with a focus on management and PPPs with a focus on development (different perspectives on PPPs purposes is also elaborated on by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011, but on a national/international level). These features are summarized in Table 2. In the former, represented, for example, by the wildlife management delegations, national park committees or nature conservation agreements, the state takes on more of a regulatory role, while in the latter, represented by PPPs for rural development, the state takes on a facilitating and enabling role. This is partly due to how regulated and formalised the policy areas are (natural resources are often more regulated and mandatory to collaborate on for the authorities), but also to the degree of conflicting interests and on what political level (national, regional or local) are in charge. In general the results reveal that the governmental authorities lack an explicit and coordinated strategy on PPPs, both when it comes to their own role in the PPPs, but also what role PPPs could or should play in relation rural development. Similar results can be found in relation to the transport infrastructure sector where Sweden, in comparison to other European countries, exert a relatively low level of governmental support for PPPs which in turn render relatively weak and uncoordinated PPP activity (Verhoest et al., 2015).

Even though the authorities are tasked with integrating the management of natural resources with rural development in accordance with the rural development strategy (Landsbygdsstrategin, Skr 2008:09:167), there is, as we have seen, little or no evidence of policy integration between management and development. A consequence of the lack of coordination and policy integration is that the responsibility for coordination and integration (i.e. the responsibility for sustainable rural development) falls on the non-state actors in the partnership, in particular those who often participate in both management-focused PPPs and development-focused PPPs. In our cases there are two examples of such actors: the reindeer-herding communities and the LRF, which are often invited to participate in the development-focused PPPs since as land-users or land-owners they often have a stake in development issues (also verified by SBA I). However, they are also invited to participate in the management-focused PPPs – the wildlife management delegations, for example – since they are affected (often negatively) by management decisions regarding wildlife. Their role, which is to contribute to development and management, but in different fora, may thus be a bit split due to the lack of a holistic approach causing difficulties in actually providing or promoting policy coordination that enhance sustainable rural development. This particular development, which still seem to lack a holistic perspective, may be an effect of the successive introduction of the involvement of a range of private actors in the process of governing, also in sectors which traditionally have been characterised by top-down government (Pierre and Peters, 2000). As pointed out by Peters (2011), much of the emphasis has been on enhancing participation from a normative perspective, while less focus has been paid to the actual design and coordination of governance processes within and between sectors, which in turn

<table>
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<th>PPP for natural resource management</th>
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<td>Mobilizing interest in development issues</td>
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<td>Getting local or regional approval of policy (i.e., legitimate, already decided policy goals)</td>
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<td>Involved actors</td>
<td>Formal and established organizations (Ownership rights, use rights, or very strong stakes in an issue, i.e., rein-herding communities, the LRF, etc.)</td>
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<td>The role of the state</td>
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<td>Power of non-state actors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Effective monitoring</td>
<td>Low, more of win–win</td>
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Table 2
Characteristics of public-private partnerships (PPPs) for natural resource management and rural development.
tend to create these unintended consequences.

One exception, in which a more holistic approach have been applied, is the partnerships concerning fish, which involve both management and development, that is, the sustainable governance and management of the fish resource itself, but also rural development through economic development of the fish resource (mainly in terms of tourism). This is possible since the fish are not endangered and management therefore focuses primarily on preventing overfishing.

If we look more specifically at the two forms of partnership that have been identified in this study, and the role of the state in these partnerships: the PPPs for development are used by the authorities to invite private actors — that is, market and civil-society actors — early in the policy process to solicit input from as many as possible (wide representation that can be modified from time to time). However, the private actors have no formal decision-making power in these partnerships, other than the potential to influence the development of the policy. The objective is often dual — that is, a goal in terms of spurring as many as possible to mobilize for development issues and in terms of securing support for policy implementation. The role of the state/authorities is thus to capitalize on the abilities and interests of various partners and to provide expertise in terms of facilitation.

In partnership for management the authorities play their regulatory role, trying, however, to adjust the rules to suit local aspects or conditions to obtain local or regional approval of policy. Several of the management partnerships in this study are mandatory and formalized (wildlife management delegations, national park committees, etc.), but there are also more informal, voluntary initiated partnerships, such as those between reindeer-herding communities and the County Administrative Board. These partnerships seem mainly to be a tool to encourage support for policy goals that have already been decided. The representation of private actors is often more narrow and is often based on property rights such as ownership, or use rights, or very strong stakes in an issue. The informal character of the PPPs often means that the actors can influence decisions, at least to some extent. The objective of the PPPs, however, is primarily policy implementation, which is why they may be considered more as a means to an end than as an end in itself. The role of the state/authorities is to ensure that policies are implemented, with some kind of consent from the market and from civil-society partners.

The prevalence of conflicting interests is another aspect that affects the robustness of the partnerships, not to mention the role of the state in the partnerships. Partnerships for management often imply that right from the beginning the actors hold different views on how the resource should be used (i.e., whether to utilize or to conserve), while partnerships for development do not have the same tensions built in — the actors do not have to ‘protect’ their interests, just see how they could be developed in accordance with other interests to render sustainable rural development. In other words, more of a win–win situation.

7. Conclusions

All of the officials agree that PPPs is a policy tool that have the potential to enable sustainable rural development provided they operate as intended, which not always seem to be the case. According to the authorities in this study, formalized partnerships work ‘better’, since they have a clearly defined task and partner representation, where roles and responsibilities are defined (cf. Behnke et al., 2016, on institutional constraint to collaborative ecosystem management within a wetland conservation partnership, and Margerum and Robinson, 2015, who describe different barriers faced by collaborative partnerships based on decision-making level and approach in sustainable water management). However, these partnerships focus mainly on the implementation of already defined policies with limited opportunities to include development issues in terms of, for example, the management of wildlife or national parks in regional or local development strategies. Partnerships for development, on the other hand, rarely focus on issues of conservation and management of wildlife or biodiversity, with the exception of fish and fish management. This lack of policy integration is one important explanation for the difficulty of implementing a sustainable rural development policy. A more holistic approach is required to achieve policy coordination, and in this respect expanded public-private partnerships and coordination within and between authorities is desirable in order to achieve sustainable rural development in the future.

To achieve a more holistic approach it is necessary to consider representation in the partnerships but also the relatively weak role of the private sectors (cf. Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh, 2016) in relation to a strong state as well as what role PPPs may play in the development of sustainable rural development.

The main contribution of this explorative study is the examination of the critical role of the state in partnerships for sustainable rural development on the regional and local level in Sweden, since previous partnership literatures mainly sort and categorize PPPs in a global or national context and their applicability to partnerships in rural contexts is not elaborated on to any great extent. Thus, our examination of the two identified types of PPPs prevalent in a Swedish rural context is important since it can help the authorities to adjust their strategies depending on the type of partnership — and more important — handle the lack of policy integration regarding management and development in a rural context. In addition, given the lack of literature on this specific topic, there is a need to further explore the different forms of partnerships and various attempts to bridge between sectors to enhance sustainable rural development on a regional and local level.

This study show that the public actors are the most strongly represented interests and often the most powerful partners in a rural context (see also Edwards et al., 2001; Derkzen et al., 2008; Shucksmit, 2010; Baker and Eckerberg, 2014). This reflects both the predominantly public sources of funding for local/regional partnerships and the fact that structural as well as social/ecological problems remain primarily the responsibility of public authorities. Authorities thus need to offer representation to a number of different public-sector organisations and/or to different interests within a particular organisation, such as a local authority (municipal and/or CAB), in order to promote inter-agency or cross-departmental action on joint problems if they are to become partnerships that have the potential to integrate management and development issues and render sustainable rural development. This is suggested by the authorities, who stress the role of municipalities in PPPs in a rural context (cf. Hardy and Koontz, 2010 that illustrate the role of municipalities in PPPs in urban vs rural context), due both to the competence the municipalities have and to the fact that they are considered to represent the citizen.

The facilitating role of the state in rural areas, which are sparsely populated and have relatively weak private sectors, is of particularly importance when it comes to inviting and establishing representative partnerships. The authorities’ role is to reduce social exclusion and increase participation by promoting the interests of private actors in local development processes, in which the partnerships are used as a method to govern (the state remains strong; there is no governance since the private actors have no formal power; and there is no horizontal shift in power). In the more formalized partnerships for management, the private actors have decision-making power, but the state’s role here is to counterbalance the increased power of the private sector, and the authorities
appear to emphasize their regulatory role.

Our study suggests that when it comes to sustainable rural development, PPPs ideally should be perceived both as an end and a means to an end (see also Bovaird, 2004; Andonova, 2010; Glasbergen, 2011a; Peters, 2011), but at the moment the partnerships are mainly seen as means by the authorities (cf. Derkzen et al., 2008). To be able to fully function as suggested the unequal participation conditions of public actors as compared with private actors must be solved. The actors’ mandates, roles and responsibilities must also be clearer, since the private actors are partners in both partnerships for management and partnerships for development, and are supposed to play quite different roles. Further, it requires a clearer directive nationally as to the authority’s role in terms of how policy integration should be coordinated and enforced, and perhaps also some additional means, if sustainable rural development in terms of integrated natural and cultural sectors, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach, is to be enforced in the form of PPPs in the future.

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Appendix A

Participants at the Workshop on 23 January 2014

Participant A, Perimeter Protection Specialist, Legal Issues and Perimeter Protection Unit, Swedish Forest Agency. Referred to as Forest Agency A in the text.

Participant B, National Parks Coordinator, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA). Referred to as SEPA B in the text.

Participant C, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA). Referred to as SEPA C in the text.

Participant D, Device of Regional Growth, Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (SAERG). Referred to as SAERG D in the text.

Participant E, Wildlife Manager (Predators), Environmental Protection Unit, County Administrative Board of Jämtland (CAB). Referred to as CAB E in the text.

Participant F, Water Administrator, County Administrative Board of Jämtland (CAB). Referred to as CAB F in the text.

Participant G, Program and Strategy Unit, County Administrative Board of Jämtland (CAB). Referred to as CAB G in the text.

Participant H, Specialist on rural development, County Administrative Board of Jämtland (CAB). Referred to as CAB H in the text.

Additional telephone interview, 15 May 2014

Participant I, Swedish Board of Agriculture. Referred to as SBA I in the text.

References