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**Towards a ‘transverse inter-sectoral debate’?
A Case Study of the Rural Partnership Programme (RPP)
in Post-Socialist Lithuania**

Abstract

By providing a forum for collaboration between diverse stakeholders, a main aim of the governance and rural development model is to ignite a representative and transverse inter-sectoral debate in relation to local development issues. This article identifies some of the determinants that arise in the transferability of the governance and rural development model from its conventional operational context of free-market liberal democracy to the post-socialist rural setting of the Ukmerge district in Lithuania, where a Rural Partnership Programme (RPP) was implemented (2003–2005). The analysis focuses specifically on how elements of the post-socialist context and other more case-specific aspects of the RPP’s operation impacted on the inter-sectoral dynamics of the RPP partnership board’s operation. The attitudes of the sectoral representatives towards the RPP as a model for representative and integrated rural development are explored.

Keywords: Governance, Rural Development, Partnership, Integrated, Lithuania.

Introduction

A defining feature of the governance and rural development model is that local representatives, coming from a variety of statutory and non-statutory sectoral viewpoints, are involved as stakeholders in influencing development processes and outcomes. Encouraging collaboration between diverse local development stakeholders is promoted in the bureaucratic literature as a means towards

addressing the complexity of locally-specific development problems, the need for diversity in the EU rural economy (involving a range of sectoral interests outside of agriculture); and the need to facilitate the participation of local representatives in the development process through adherence to principles of ‘good governance’. By fostering the cooperation of local non-statutory (NGO, private) and statutory (public, government) stakeholders in development interventions, the governance and rural development model seeks to achieve representative and locally-honed rural development, and to ignite a “transverse inter-sectoral debate” in relation to development issues (LEADER European Observatory, 1997).

The EU LEADER¹ programme employs the governance and rural development model and represents the primary exponent of what “might become the dominant principle and practice of European rural development policy” (Kovach 2000:182). Curtin and Varley (1997) sum up the central policy aspiration behind the growing status of the governance and rural development model in the EU context:

the basic idea behind these schemes is that all the competent actors in the development process be brought together in a way that will allow them to pool their talents and complement each other over a set period during which, under the stimulus provided by the partnership, a cycle of accelerated local development will occur (Curtin and Varley 1997: 142).

The dynamics of how ‘*all the competent actors in the development process*’ come together and how they succeed in complementing each other and pooling their talents are complex, and differ from case to case. The institutional conditions that facilitate the operationalisation of the governance and rural development model crucially rely on the strategic representation of different sectoral interests in the partnership process. The rationale for the input of different sectoral interests in the development process through partnership assumes a starting point where there is a certain level of discreteness, even factional opposition, between private, NGO and public sectors.

In anticipating a detectable multi-stakeholder decision-making process, the inter-sectoral ‘bargaining’ feature of partnerships inevitably implicates an interchange between sectors in terms of resources and forms of agency. The power structure of governance and rural development in its operational form

¹ *Liaisons Entre Actions de Developpement de l’Economie Rurale (LEADER).*

varies from case to case and of crucial consequence is the status of different sectoral representatives on the board, and how they inter-relate. A compulsory partner in most state-funded networks/partnerships/alliances is the state itself, identified by some commentators as the 'coordinator and manager' of such governance mechanisms (Murdoch and Abram 1998: 41, Varley 1991a). Curtin and Varley (1997) state that in the case of Irish area-based partnership, *what the Irish state/EU have in mind in the area-based partnerships is not the simple handing over of responsibility to local actors. On the contrary, the expectation is that external actors must be centrally involved in providing resources, deciding what is required to be done, who is to be admitted as legitimate partners and how the partnerships are actually to operate* (p. 142). O'Toole and Burdess (2004) convey a similar view when they say *Higher levels of governance 'steer' the self-governing processes of (funded) small rural communities, expecting them to 'row' for themselves*. Recent research conducted by Furmankiewicz et al (2009) focuses in particular on how the dominant position of local authorities representing the public sector has resulted in a failure of the partnership process to *fully engage a range of community and private sectors* (p. 52).

Curtin and Varley (1997) put forward three models that represent how partnerships can operate in practice:

1. *Where the dominant partner is the state, laying down the foundational parameters of the partnership: the programme of work, the selection of partners, the money allocated and the time allowed* (Varley 1991).
2. *Where the dominant partners are the economically advantaged (private enterprise partners), taking a Marxist view of social interests and political power.*
3. *Where bargaining power is conferred on community/local partners. A possibility here is that communities manipulate the potential benefits of the schemes to their own advantage* (Curtin and Varley 1997: 145).

Derkzen et al (2008) analyse the 'power struggles' inherent to partnership arrangements by analysing the 'exclusionary dynamics' of partnership not simply as those which compromise the governance of partnership processes, but as loci where different 'arenas of power' can come into play. Derkzen et al (2008) point to the shortcomings of focusing on implications of resources alone in analysing inter-sectoral partnership dynamics by and, referring to Allen (2003), highlight the need to focus on how *the use and effect of resources may be modified, displaced or disrupted depending upon the relationships that come into play* (p. 458). Derkzen et al (2008) pay attention to the particular dynamism of social relations that continuously develop and change within the

partnership through interactive, iterative processes. Different power relations emerge among stakeholder partners in different instances of rural development decision-making and action within the context of the partnership process. As such, each local case of partnership operation can be analysed as a complex site in which different representations of power come into play.

The dynamics of inter-sectoral relations in how governance and rural development programmes operate in practice become even more complex in the post-socialist context, where an alternative heritage forms the political and civil backdrop. In the case of the EU15, a long-standing liberal democratic political tradition and a complex network of civil society institutions make possible the means by which LEADER, as a model that relies on the weighty participation of such institutions, can become operational in practice. There are organised and powerful interest groups in the private, governmental and voluntary sectors in the EU15, which have been in existence for the most part of the EU itself. Despite the comparatively limited tradition of third-sector mobilisation in CEE and the alternative political context in which governance and rural development programmes are operating, the literature suggests that LEADER is “a potentially positive, political force to break the bureaucratic and orthodox thinking that has a stranglehold on CEEC rural development” (Kovach 2000). Likewise, Slee (2000) argues with reference to a UK-funded rural partnership programme implemented in the Baltic States that participatory development processes are potentially far more effective for the purposes of reducing social exclusion and poverty than ‘top-down’ pre-accession programmes such as the EC Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD). CEE member states’ recent political heritage of socialism inevitably gives rise to an alternative implementation context for the governance and rural development model, however, and the debate on the operationalisation of the model may need some re-contextualisation in this light.

This paper presents a partial analysis of the issues that arise in the transferability of the governance and rural development model from its conventional EU operational context of free-market liberal democracy to the post-socialist rural setting. The paper draws from empirical research conducted in the Ukmerge district of Lithuania, where the UK Department for International Development (DfID) implemented a Rural Partnership Programme (2003–2005). The overall analysis included an examination of the socio-cultural factors influencing community-based collective action (Macken-Walsh 2009) and the variations that can arise in collective action in

different local contexts (Macken-Walsh 2007). This paper presents an analysis of the operation of the RPP's inter-sectoral partnership board and focuses specifically on the factors present in a case-study post-socialist rural district that determined how the RPP partnership board functioned as a representative tool for achieving integrated, cross-sectoral rural development.

Methodology

The analysis of this paper is derived from a doctoral study in sociology that employed a case-study approach to exploring the factors arising from the interchange of the EU-inspired governance and rural development model and a case-study post-socialist rural environment. A number of methodological approaches were employed to explore this research question using secondary and primary data. An analysis of secondary statistical data was undertaken as an initial phase in the fieldwork (Macken-Walsh 2008). Other secondary data sources were used: proxy data such as media articles and radio programme transcripts; a diversity of RPP documentation including reports, minutes of meetings, and files on the activities of community organisations; and documentation authored by community organisations independently from the RPP partnership board and RPP personnel. Extensive primary qualitative field research exercises were undertaken between 2003–2005, consisting of qualitative interviews and participant observation at community and public meetings. An interpreter was present at all times and extensive field notes were taken. The primary field research tool used was qualitative face-to-face semi-structured interviewing. In total, 170 interviews were conducted: 95 took the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants (nationally and locally) with expertise in relation to rural-related issues; RPP personnel; members of the RPP partnership board; and representatives of non-statutory rural community organisations in rural villages. The remaining 75 took the form of brief structured interviews that were designed to survey broader awareness and attitudes towards non-statutory organisations in the rural villages².

² The population of the villages in which RPP-funded community organisations were based averages at 360, but spans from 122 in Laumenai (in Zelva *seniunjia*) to 842 in Sventupes (in Vidiskiai *seniunjia*).

The analysis presented in the current paper draws from this body of empirical research, focusing specifically on how the RPP partnership board took form and operated as a model for cross-sectoral, integrated rural development. The analysis of this paper focuses on the local determinants that configured the operation of a rural partnership programme, paying attention to the implementation approach of the RPP itself, the inter-sectoral dynamics of the partnership board's operation, and the understandings and attitudes of the sectoral representatives vis-à-vis the function and operation of the RPP as a governance and rural development model. Influences arising from the historical experience of socialism on the operation of the partnership board are identified, through examining local participants' perceptions of private, non-governmental and statutory interests, and of partnership as a mechanism for collaboration between these different sectoral interests.

The Ukmerge District and the RPP: a Case Study

The Ukmerge district is centrally located within the state, and is typical of rural districts in Lithuania in size, development conditions and population. The district exhibits many of the typical characteristics of rural areas across CEE that are experiencing the effects of the transition period after a long period of state socialism. In Ukmerge, the dilapidated remains of the old collective farms (farm buildings, offices and dwelling units) are still evident throughout the various rural *seniunijos* (translated as 'ward' or 'eldership'³), and the majority of former farm employees continue to live in *seniunijos* as independent farmers, operating mostly at subsistence scale (see CEC, 2002). The Ukmerge district is experiencing problems common to other rural areas of post-socialist Lithuania: high un- and under-employment rates (21% unemployment rate in 2001); considerable degrees of rural poverty; a poorly developed and non-diversified rural economy; a variety of social problems mainly associated with alcohol abuse; and inadequate infrastructural facilities, such as sanitary and water facilities (DfID/RPP 2003; CEC 2002; Edwards et al 2005). The emergence of new enterprises in the transition period has been slow in post-collectivised rural villages and in the case of Ukmerge, most services and businesses are located in Ukmerge town. There are growing

³ There may be several villages within a single *seniunija*.

differentials between urban and rural incomes, and worsening indicators on unemployment, morbidity, and poverty in rural areas (see McAlinden 2001; DfID/RPP 2003).

The Baltic Rural Partnership Programme (RPP) claimed in 2000 that national and international policies were somewhat ineffective in dealing with continuing rural decline (DfID/RPP 2003). In 2000, of the Baltic states, only Estonia had a viable national regional development agency, and in Lithuania and Latvia, rural development policies were in the most part designed by agricultural ministries, focusing mainly on the agricultural sector (DfID/RPP 2000). These policies were perceived by the RPP as having *failed to develop a wider concept of rural development, and to directly address rural poverty* and it was stated that *there needs to be a more widely based concept of rural development embracing non-farm rural dwellers, non-agricultural forms of economic activity, and the processes of interaction between urban and rural economies and peoples* (DfID/RPP 2000). It was claimed that regional policies and regional development programmes in the pre-accession period had tended to work on policy issues at the centre and were becoming increasingly dominated by the need to meet requirements to access EC funds such as the SAPARD (DfID/RPP 2000).

The RPP was designed to provide an alternative to the prevailing 'top-down' approach and thereby "make a unique contribution" through its participatory *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Approach* (DfID/RPP 2003). The RPP claimed, "participatory approaches will reach deeper into rural communities and address the needs of the poorest in society and those least able to access funds such as the SAPARD, and develop livelihood enhancing initiatives" (DfID/RPP 2000). It was envisaged, that *Through participative processes and by creating partnerships involving local governments, communities and NGOs the project will seek to strengthen and empower local communities and institutions to determine and shape their future* (DfID/RPP 2000). Governance and rural development is identified within the programme rationale of the RPP as a fitting approach to solving both the predominant rural development problems in post-socialist rural areas of the Baltic States, and in the EU-integration period to strengthen local institutions for future participatory rural development planning processes such as LEADER. Reflecting the need for decentralisation, the RPP was to focus on building the institutional capacity of local governments to plan and implement solutions through "inclusive partnerships" (DfID/RPP 2000).

Establishing new Governance Institutions in the Ukmerge District

In early stages of the initialisation of the RPP, the programme's contractor (Enterplan⁴), subcontractor (NICO⁵), and national consultants (development professionals originating from each of the three Baltic States where the RPP was implemented) had a significant influence on how the original programme concept was adapted into an operational model. The team changed the initial orientation of the programme (altering the original terms of reference), from a primary focus on training and education, to an approach that prioritised capacity building of local participative institutions and using consultative strategies to design a local development strategy⁶. Through the RPP's establishment of new governance institutions, it was envisaged that the development process would be 'handed over' to local people, which was the overriding characteristic of the RPP's ideology and approach in implementation⁷ (interview with Lithuanian National Consultant, November 2005).

RPP personnel adopted a highly consultative approach with local people in the design and implementation of the RPP operational strategy. In advance of the commencement of the RPP programme, details of the programme were published in newspapers and approximately 300 letters per district were distributed to members of the public. Information meetings were held in Ukmerge town and the public turnout reached approximately 100–150 people per meeting. The priority objectives for the district's operational strategy were identified on the basis of results arising from a 'social and economic needs analysis'⁸ and a 'local audit' conducted by RPP personnel. The local audit involved focus group interviews with inhabitants of each of the rural *seniunijos* in the Ukmerge district, through which the main objectives of the programme's

⁴ www.enterplan.co.uk

⁵ www.nico.org.uk

⁶ Changes were made in consultation with DfID, the programme's funding agency.

⁷ A notable characteristic of the work and programmes of NICO (main subcontractor in the RPP) is the prioritisation of local participation in the development process. See www.nico.org.uk

⁸ As part of this analysis, statistical data was compiled from the Lithuanian Statistical Yearbook (2000); the Demography Yearbook (2000); The Ukmerge district Annual Report (2001); the Ukmerge Department for Statistics Report (2001); The Ukmerge Small and Medium Sized Enterprises Development Plan; and other various plans supplied by state agencies.

development strategy were identified. The local audit was conducted by nine task-groups in Ukmerge that collected information from *a) those who were affected by social exclusion and poverty, and b) those who affected it* (DfID/RPP 2003). The following social groups were represented: youth; the elderly; the unemployed; families with a large number of dependents; families in receipt of social welfare; the disabled; lone parents; small entrepreneurs; the heads of local authorities (*seniunjes*). Rural inhabitants representing each of these groups from each of the *seniunijos* were interviewed.

Table 1: Classification of interviewees for Ukmerge local audit

Title of <i>seniunja</i>	Population	Percentage of population	Number of participants in the focus group interview
1. Ukmerge Town	30596	60,0	28
2. Deltuva	3523	7,0	3
3. Vidiskes	3470	7,0	3
4. Siesikai	1981	4,0	2
5. Pivonija	1953	4,0	2
6. Taujenai	1854	3,5	2
7. Zelva	1566	3,0	2
8. Pabaiskas	1418	3,0	2
9. Vepriai	1334	2,5	1
10. Sesuoliai	1227	2,0	1
11. Lyduokiai	1114	2,0	1
12. Zemaitkiemis	1002	2,0	1
In total	51038	100	48

Source: RPP Ukmerge district Strategy, January 2003.

Reflecting the data gathered through the local audit, the following key problems emerged from the local audit as requiring urgent attention in the Ukmerge District:

- Inefficient farming,
- Lack of necessary skills to adapt to changing economic and social conditions,
- Safety problems in rural areas,
- Lack of communication and cooperation between local government and rural communities,
- The breakdown of community fabric.

Incorporating these problems, the following three priority courses of action were adopted by the Ukmerge RPP development strategy:

- Strengthening of community infrastructure and development of the local social network,
- Increasing economic diversity,
- Building a ‘safe and secure rural environment’ (Ukmerge District Strategy, RPP, January 2003:5).

The Operation of the RPP in Practice

When the RPP was implemented in Ukmerge, there were 51,038 inhabitants and 20,953 resided in the rural *seniunijos* that represented the catchment area for the RPP⁹. While LEADER partnerships are conventionally tripartite (including the private sector; the state sector; and the NGO sector); the RPP made a distinction between the state sector and local government sector, representing four sectors on the board (see Figure 1). The representation of the state sector as a separate entity was decided by RPP personnel on the basis of the traditionally strong role of state bodies in Lithuania, which are associated with social services such as health-care; unemployment and disability benefits, social housing, and education. In rural areas of Lithuania where there is a high percentage rate of unemployment, there is a high reliance on these state agencies (see DfID/RPP 2003).

A stipulation of the RPP was that only community-based organisations were eligible to submit a funding application for a local development project. Given the virtual absence of non-statutory rural interest groups in the Ukmerge district, the RPP was faced with the challenge of encouraging the formation of new civil society institutions through which the representation of different local interests could be achieved (see Macken-Walsh 2009). Strategies were employed by the programme that responded directly to local circumstances, specifically the training in community facilitation that addressed the low level of non-statutory activity in the district (that would not ordinarily be included

⁹ Ukmerge is the only town within the district and is located in a geographically central position, allowing all rural areas equal and relatively easy access. Surrounding the town, there are eleven administratively divided *seniunijos*: Deltuva, Lyduokes, Pabaiskas, Pivonija, Siesikai, Sesuoliai, Vepriai, Vidiskiu, Zelva, and Zemaitkiemis.

to such an extent in governance and rural development programmes in the EU15). Only projects in the rural *seniunijos* were eligible to apply for RPP funding.

Figure 1: Distribution of sectoral representatives on RPP partnership board

Local Government	Local State Bodies
Economic/Private Sector	Community and Voluntary sector

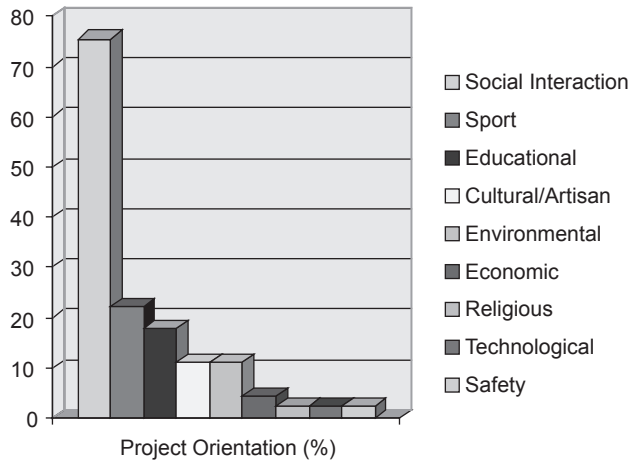
Source: RPP Strategy Document, 2003.

As per the RPP rules, the funding applications of the community organisations could respond to any of the three priority measures of the RPP project: strengthening of community infrastructure; increasing economic diversity; and creating a safe rural environment. Forty-five funding applications were submitted to the RPP partnership board, indicating a high number of community organisations¹⁰, and 19 of these were granted funding by the RPP. The 45 development projects submitted by community organisations to the RPP partnership board are classified according to the orientation of their primary objective in Figure 2, and the 19 projects that received funding from the RPP are classified according to the same criteria in Figure 3.

From this classification, it is clear that the majority of projects related moreover to one of the priority objectives of the RPP (the strengthening of community infrastructure) rather than to the other two (increasing economic diversity and creating a safe rural environment). The projects funded by the board were proportionately similar to the orientation of projects that were submitted.

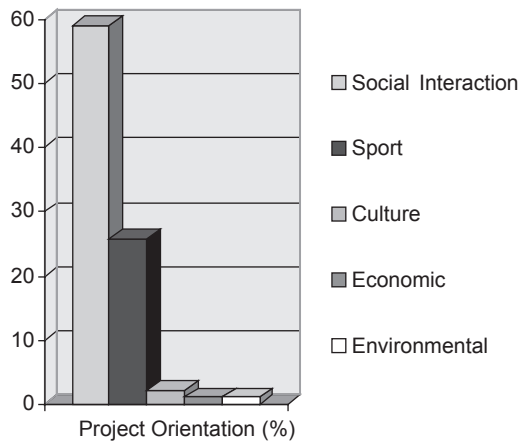
¹⁰ A small number of organisations submitted more than one application.

Figure 2: Classification of all 45 development applications submitted to the RPP partnership board



Source: Compiled from data received from the RPP.

Figure 3: Classification of 19 development projects funded by the RPP partnership board



Source: Compiled from data received from the RPP.

The RPP Board: A Profile

There were two main characterising features of the profile of people who became involved in the partnership board. First, the majority of sectoral representatives involved in the RPP partnership board (see Figure 4) were based in Ukmerge town, rather than in the rural *seniunijos*. There are few differentiated sectoral activities in the rural *seniunijos*¹¹, where the business sector is typically confined to small often cooperatively owned household goods shops and grocery shops referred to locally as 'commercial' shops. At the time of RPP implementation, there were only two interest groups located in the rural *seniunijos* of Ukmerge: a youth-club and a community organisation¹². Interviews conducted with members of the partnership board revealed that only one of the members lived and worked in the rural *seniunijos*. It is also notable that the third sector is represented in the most part by NGOs that are not local to Ukmerge, explained by the very low level of third-sector activity in the Ukmerge district.

Second, most of the representatives were representing their sectors as individuals rather than as members of interest groups within their respective sectors. This is partly explained by the formation process of the partnership board where, given the deficiency of non-statutory interest groups in the district, the RPP contacted individual persons (rather than interest groups) who were involved (generally in their capacity as employees) in each of the sectors that were to be represented on the partnership board. Senior figures within sectoral groups, because they were easily identifiable, were the first point of contact for the purposes of disseminating information on the RPP board, and tended to become involved personally rather than delegating the task to a colleague. The other explanatory factor, discussed above, is the paucity of private and third-sector interest groups in the Ukmerge district.

¹¹ The English translation for *seniunija* is 'ward'. Within each ward, there may be several villages.

¹² There were also a number of sport clubs, mostly hunting clubs.

Figure 4: Members of the RPP Partnership Board

Public Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of a children's boarding school located in Ukmerge town • Director of a state employment agency in Ukmerge town • Director of an agricultural consultation service in Ukmerge town • Principal of a primary school in a rural <i>seniunija</i> • Public health nurse based in Ukmerge town
Government Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of a children's rights protection service in Ukmerge town • Director of the Municipal Government Economic and Finance Department (Ukmerge town) • Head (<i>seniunje</i>) of a rural <i>seniunja</i> • Deputy head of the Municipal Government Agricultural Department (Ukmerge town) • Head of the Municipal Government Cultural Department (Ukmerge town)
Private Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bank manager located in Ukmerge town (chairman of the partnership board) • Director of the Ukmerge Chamber of Trade, Industry and Crafts located in Ukmerge town • Director of an agricultural advisory service located in Ukmerge town • Director of a private-stock company located in Ukmerge town • Proprietor of a hairdressing business in Ukmerge town
NGO sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of a children and youth centre in a rural <i>seniunja</i> • Representative of a Vilnius-based cultural NGO • Representative from the Ukmerge town branch of a Lithuanian children's rights protection service • Chairwoman of a rural community group (youth club) in a rural <i>seniunja</i> • Member of Ukmerge Citizens' Rights Committee based in Ukmerge town

Source: Compiled from data received from the RPP.

Sectoral Representation on the RPP Partnership Board

An analysis of inter-sectoral relations carried out by interviewing partnership board members from each of the four sectors (public, government, private, NGO) represented on the board conclusively found that members had little or no awareness of their representative function on the board. A number of board members were unsure about what sector they were representing on the board. It was apparent that in the perceptions of board members, there was a lack of differentiation among sectoral representatives, all those interviewed

referring to their *common purpose* and failing to suggest that they had any particular interests or concerns that pertained to the sector they represented. In describing their activities and mandates, members of the RPP board paid little or no attention to the particular development concerns and needs of the sectors they represented, nor to any benefits accrued or attempted to accrue through involvement in the partnership board. When specifically asked whether they saw themselves as representatives of their sector, the majority of board members replied 'no', the remainder replying 'yes' for reasons such as:

I was chosen because of the particular job I have

I was representative in the sense that problems experienced by all seniunjes are the same

It was only fair that a representative of a rights group was chosen to be on the board

There was no evidence of strategic representation of sectors, however, and when members were asked whether they met others within their sectors with the specific purpose of discussing RPP strategy, all replied in the negative, four adding that they regularly but casually discussed the project at their workplace. When asked whether any strategy was employed by them to investigate the main problems experienced by their sector in order to address or highlight these problems in their activities on the board, all respondents replied in the negative. A further question was posed to partnership board members concerning what they believed to be their main function on the board. The majority stated that their main function was to mobilise rural villagers with most making reference to the RPP training they had received to do this successfully; three stated that their function was to evaluate project applications; and only one stated that her function was to represent the community sector. Similarly, when the board representatives were asked to what extent they perceived their role as seeking to leverage particular outcomes for their sector, all replied in the negative. On the other hand, when the board representatives were asked to what extent they perceived their role as seeking to disseminate information about the programme and encouraging popular participation in the programme, all replied positively. Furthermore, in the context of choosing or approving projects, board representatives were asked if their selection projects were influenced by the sector they represented and thus differed from the opinion of other representatives as a result. All respondents replied that their opinions did not differ according to the sector they represented,

some explaining that differences in partners' opinions amounted to the fact that people on the board had different knowledge, and could offer advice on certain aspects of the rural village projects.

It was claimed by board representatives that there was no 'weak' sector, in terms of resources, dedication to and participation in the activities and procedures of the board. There was no evidence of a particular sector being at an advantage, and when board members were asked whether they believed that all members were equal in skills and decision-making power when it came to executing the board's mandate, all those interviewed stated that they believed so. This question was also posed to inhabitants of the rural *seniunijos* who were involved in the implementation of RPP-funded projects on the ground and they affirmed the views of board members, to the extent of their knowledge of how the board operated. The commitment of all board members to the RPP process was evident from the interviews and from records of RPP meetings and events. Actions to strategically represent discrete sectors, however, were notably absent overall.

It transpired that the RPP partnership board functioned moreover as a decision-making body for the allocation of RPP funding to projects that were designed independently from the board by non-statutory community organisations in the rural *seniunijos* (see Macken-Walsh 2009). In their selection of projects, with the exception of a single project, members of the partnership board reached decisions by full consensus. In a number of cases, partnership board members liaised with community organisations to clarify details in relation to the projects submitted by the latter but interviews conducted revealed that the board's role in operation was advisory rather than participatory. Along with RPP consultants, the board members provided support to village implementers when requests arose for information on RPP-related issues, or clarification on procedures relating to the terms of funding. While in one case, members of the board were requested to be present at village meetings where a dispute arose in relation to the newly established community organisation (see Macken-Walsh 2007), the common experience of community organisations was that they encountered members of the partnership board only once or twice during the project implementation period (the normal time-span of which was one year).

Discussion & Conclusion

Considering the deficiency of interest groups in the Ukmerge district, the RPP was implemented in a rural environment that is largely atypical to rural areas in the liberal democratic EU15. As a result of the virtual absence of private and third-sector interest groups in the *seniunijos* particularly, the partnership board was constituted of representatives from the private, public, government and NGO sectors who, with the exception of one, were based in Ukmerge town. As such, the inter-sectoral board was inevitably estranged from the rural *seniunijos* where few such sectoral differentiations existed. In addition, only organisations and projects based in the rural *seniunijos* were eligible for RPP funding, a factor that furthermore compromised the extent to which the town-based partnership board members became genuine 'stakeholders' in decision-making processes. It is notable, however, that the estrangement between the rural-based RPP-funded organisations and the town-based RPP partnership board, did not result in any tangible constraints on how rural-based organisations autonomously designed and created development projects (see also Macken-Walsh 2009).

While a motivation to combine different sectoral interests in the development process is characteristic of the governance and rural development model, the capacity of the model to thereby deliver effective and representative development is presumptuous that the local economy is diverse, and that there is an accordingly wide range of interest groups that have adequate experience and capacity to engage in rural development strategising. Furthermore, the operationalisation of the RPP in the Ukmerge district is suggestive that the types of power and resource differentials that can exist between different partners are less pronounced comparative to cases in the liberal democratic EU15 and elsewhere in CEE. However, while the case of the RPP offers insight to how the post-socialist rural context can shape how governance and rural development partnerships can take form and operate, it is likely that decision-making may become more politicised in cases of highly funded LEADER programmes that are linked in with EC and national rural development plans. Such a scenario in Poland is analysed in detail by Furmankiewicz et al (2008) who observe the power and resource differentials placing local authorities in a privileged position. In such a scenario, given the complex processes of private and third-sector interest groups' development, unless targeted supports are dedicated to capacity building within these sectors, their weak bargaining status is likely to be prolonged.

Contributing to the non-emergence of a ‘transverse inter-sectoral debate’ in the case of the RPP, was the absence of a tradition of sectoral differentiation in a period when distinct sectoral interests are only now becoming defined with institutional transition to free-market liberal democracy. Such inter-sectoral debates, as noted by Derkzen et al (2008), should be understood as representing not only static power and resource differentials but dynamic processes where iterative decision-making and bargaining processes can lead to institutional development and capacity building. While power and resource differentials among partners did not represent the catalyst for institutional development and capacity building in the case of the RPP, the programme was effective in encouraging the establishment of a high number of new community organisations and in maximising the participation of local people in the development process. The RPP also gave a valuable opportunity to the Uckeroke district to operationalise a partnership board in advance of the more politicised EC LEADER programme. In this context, it is relevant to note that representatives of the community organisations and partnership board established by the RPP are today members of the LEADER partnership board that was established in the district in 2007¹³.

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¹³ <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/memberstates/lithuania.htm>

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