

Making Country Ownership a Reality: An NGO Perspective

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Country stakeholders—governments, parliamentarians and civil society—have always been challenged by a limited ability to influence decisions made at the international level. With international donors now seeking to move decision-making and ownership to the country level, we have a remarkable opportunity to establish a transparent, participatory and inclusive process. This is particularly critical to the SRHR community which, due to the often controversial nature of the work, requires institutionalized processes as well as strong, well-informed champions, to ensure that its concerns are adequately funded in development strategies.

Population Action International is dedicating a series of research commentaries to the examination of new trends in funding mechanisms for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This commentary is the second in the series, and builds on the September 2006 commentary,¹ by exploring one of the key principles now being embraced by the donor community—that of country ownership. The authors do not intend to explore the issue of country ownership in depth here, but rather to identify key areas that could be the focus of new discussions and research within the SRHR community. The concept of *country ownership*, as outlined in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, is cited as a key tenet of aid effectiveness strategies embraced by large donors such as The World Bank in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) processes, bilateral donors that are adopting direct budget support, and global funding mechanisms such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM).

How is Country Ownership Defined?

Most references to country ownership in the development assistance literature mention the concepts of national leadership, responsibility and participation. For example, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness of 2005 states that country ownership will be achieved when “partner countries exercise effective leadership over their development policies and strategies.”² The World Bank defines country ownership as the existence of “sufficient political support within a country to implement its development strategy.” It also defines it as “demand driven by the country.”³ The Millennium Challenge Account cites as one of its three core values to “place a country in the driver’s seat of its own development.”⁴ And section 4.1 of The European Consensus on Development, the instrument meant to guide the European Union’s development assistance efforts, indicates that “ownership and partnership” are among its common principles and that “the EU supports the broad

participation of all stakeholders in countries' development and encourages all parts of society to take part." (Section 4.3)

Country Ownership is More than Government Ownership

Governments often appear as the *de facto* targets of country ownership strategies. Civil society⁵ and other non-state actors are mentioned more marginally, in many cases, as stakeholders whose participation is supported and encouraged, but not "required" as an indispensable component of country ownership. However, country ownership cannot be defined only at the government level. Governments change and rarely do they adequately represent the views of the entire citizenship of a nation. Moreover, there is a large body of literature showing that broader participation and public consultation result in better development policy and programs. Country ownership requires the active participation of non-state stakeholder groups, in particular, as is asserted in the Paris Declaration, civil society and the private sector (and, we would add, parliamentarians):

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"Partner countries commit to: Take the lead in co-ordinating aid at all levels in conjunction with other development resources in dialogue with donors and encouraging the participation of civil society and the private sector." (Paragraph 14, Paris Declaration)⁶

The challenge is to ensure that words such as these are effectively translated into action. The concept of country ownership must be moved from being part of a newly agreed policy framework into actual implementation of participatory mechanisms at the country level.

In this context, we suggest the following definition of country ownership: *An institutionalized process that allows for the participation, as equal partners, of governments, non-state actors (such as civil society and the private sector), and parliamentarians, in the development, implementation and monitoring of national development plans.*

Making Country Ownership a Reality

Country ownership is critical to the success of new development assistance modalities. In turn, the full involvement and broad participation of civil society, parliamentarians and the private sector is critical to the success of country ownership.

To facilitate the full involvement so critical to country ownership, certain conditions must be present:

1. A policy framework supportive of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

A prerequisite for non governmental organizations (NGOs and other

CSOs) to be equal development partners is the existence of a policy framework that recognizes their relevance, role and right to, for example, conduct independent activities (without the pre-approval of the government, including for the receipt of foreign funds); to meet and express opinions; to approve self-governance mechanisms, as well as to engage in advocacy and monitor the work of the government.

2. Existence of institutional mechanisms for the broad participation of CSOs in the development, implementation and monitoring of development plans

Full participation of CSOs in all development processes must be institutionalized. It should not be needs-driven or ad-hoc. Rather, it should take place throughout the entire process, including during the policy development, implementation and monitoring phases.

Stakeholders themselves cannot be token participants, but must truly reflect the constituents they are intended to represent. For example, civil society representatives at the table must include broader participation than national or international NGOs. CSOs have the responsibility to ensure that local and community-based groups, including representatives of vulnerable and marginalized populations, have a voice. Appropriate mechanisms—such as a transparent election process of representatives—should be in place.

3. Investment in capacity building

After decades of donor dependency and donor-driven policies, country ownership cannot be expected to be realized without substantial investments in capacity building. All major stakeholders in the development process need to increase their capacity to make country ownership a reality. This paper focuses in particular on the capacity building needs of country governments, including: government officials and civil servants; Members of Parliament, as part of the legislative branch of the state and the link between the government and the citizens; and civil society, including NGOs and community-based organizations.

Key capacity building needs include:

- ◆ Understanding development assistance mechanisms, in particular country budget, expenditure and reporting processes;
- ◆ Developing country-specific performance and results-oriented indicators;
- ◆ Engaging in advocacy and watchdog activities (not only with the central government, but also with regional and local authorities);
- ◆ Monitoring implementation and setting up accountability mechanisms;

- ◆ Strengthening the role and autonomy of parliaments in policy development and monitoring;
- ◆ Creating effective and inclusive management structures;
- ◆ Developing and engaging in participatory mechanisms and processes at the national and regional levels; and
- ◆ Developing alliances and partnerships.

While some are more relevant to certain constituencies than others, all the above needs are applicable to the three groups of stakeholders identified earlier (governments, CSOs, and parliamentarians).

Capacity building cannot be effective without a sustained source of funding from both donors and country governments; the active engagement of recipients (not only as targets but also actors); flexibility to adjust to national and local conditions; and sufficient time to be able to achieve and demonstrate results.

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4. Full information and transparency

The provision of relevant, timely and transparent information to all stakeholders about process and progress in a continuous manner is key to their meaningful participation. It remains difficult for NGOs and other non-state actors to gain access to information during critical periods of decision-making. Information often arrives too late and incomplete, particularly regarding funding levels, sources and channels. Commitments to transparency made by donors and aid recipient countries are insufficient if they don't include the systematic disclosure of financial information to CSOs and the general public.

Shared Accountability and Responsibility

Accountability and responsibility for country ownership is shared by all stakeholders—recipient governments, donors, parliamentarians and civil society. Country ownership cannot be achieved without mechanisms to operationalize and monitor the responsibility of each of these constituencies.

Donor Responsibility

The donor community has designed various policies and procedures to help foster country ownership, such as:

- ◆ Changing aid modalities to mechanisms that move decision-making to the country level (for example, PRSPs and direct budget support);

- ◆ Formation of country level coordination committees—such as the Global Fund’s Country Coordination Mechanism;
- ◆ Building capacity to better enable countries to take leadership of the development process—such as technical assistance to the country in the preparation of strategy documents, and preparation of guidelines for the drafting of those documents or proposals; and
- ◆ Encouraging or mandating broad participation in the development of aid strategies—for example, by requesting that strategy formulation processes include consultations with private sector, NGOs, parliamentarians and other stakeholders.

Moreover, donors are responsible for ensuring that the actions they take in each nation do not contradict or render impossible the actual translation of their country ownership policies and procedures. For example, in a report on the Paris Declaration, Britain’s Department for International Development (DFID) noted the following donor actions that can potentially undermine government capacity and country ownership: donor pressure to spend the funding, lack of alignment of donor and government planning cycles, donor overcrowding, donor paperwork requirements, and lack of sustained and long term financial support.⁷

The Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) is another example of how donors may promote country ownership with one hand and obstruct it with the other. The CPIA is a rating used by the World Bank to assess the economic, social, and political performance of borrowing governments. It is based on a set of criteria developed by the bank with very marginal involvement of country governments. The CPIA is also mentioned in the Paris Declaration (in the Alignment 2010 Targets). A good CPIA rating is a condition to access more financing or debt relief and it also plays a key role in the consideration of a PRSP by the donor. However, country governments have no meaningful involvement in the development of the CPIA with the World Bank. They can, at best, comment on the CPIA “as part of a consultation process, not as a negotiation of the rating(s).”

In addition, donors have, through their discussions with country governments and their financial support, a vital role to play in ensuring that CSOs (1) participate as full and equal partners in national development processes and (2) act as effective advocates and government watchdogs. The same could be said for the unique position that donors hold to promote and support national parliaments that are actively engaged in policy development and monitoring.

Finally, donor governments are responsible for allowing for differences in the manifestation of country ownership in each nation depending on its specific political, economic and governance context. The adoption of certain aid mechanisms can also be tailored to specific levels across

the continuum of country ownership, ranging from project support for countries with weak ownership capacity to direct budget support for countries with strong ownership.

Recipient Government Responsibility

As welcomed as it is, country ownership demands an enormous effort from aid recipient countries. Such an effort can not be successful without the financial support of donors (including funds earmarked for capacity building). However, equally important is the level of commitment of recipient governments to creating the necessary conditions for country ownership to take place. Action is particularly needed in three areas:

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- ◆ Implementing transparency and accountability mechanisms. This is particularly important in the area of financial resources. National budgets and allocations need to be transparent and accessible by the public at both central and decentralized levels.
- ◆ Setting up institutional mechanisms for the participation of CSOs in national development policies, going beyond the consultative level, and allocating the necessary resources to facilitate such participation.
- ◆ Strengthening the role of parliaments and involving them in national development strategies. In too many countries, parliaments are weak and unable to influence policy development or to check and balance government actions. Country governments are responsible for undertaking the necessary reforms for national parliaments to ensure a feedback and approval process for national development plans. Once this has been achieved, the creation and support of parliamentary committees on poverty reduction instruments, like PRSPs, and budgeting committees can be an effective way to promote parliamentary input and monitoring. Finally, parliamentarians need full information on all aspects of development assistance—including information on donor funding outside of the budget and from vertical initiatives.

Civil Society Responsibility

SRHR NGOs and other members of civil society play a vital role in ensuring that country ownership principles are realized by:

- ◆ Advocating for full stakeholder participation in development processes and setting up the necessary mechanisms (such as transparent and wide-ranging election of representatives) to ensure that marginalized constituencies, as well as those operating outside of the capitals, have a seat at the table.

- ◆ Building their capacity to understand and analyze national budgets, and track the expenditure of resources at the central, regional and local levels. Indeed, CSOs have a major role to play in producing reliable and independent information on such expenditures and whether or not they deviate from international commitments assumed by governments in areas such as SRHR, HIV/AIDS and aid effectiveness. By monitoring government's allocations of financial resources, SRHR NGOs and other CSOs can make an enormous contribution to the promotion and achievement of a key aspect of country ownership—budgets that are responsive to the needs of the citizenry.
- ◆ Building the skills of key stakeholders, not only at the central, but also at the regional and local levels, to participate in and monitor development strategies.
- ◆ Organizing themselves in networks and coalitions to monitor and track accountability at national and global levels as well as informing and mobilizing the general public in support of inclusive country ownership policies and actions.
- ◆ The watchdog role mentioned above should also encompass the development of a tool for the assessment of country ownership. The tool would provide a manageable number of clear, results-oriented indicators addressing key aspects of country ownership agreed upon by CSOs at large and members of the SRHR community in particular. The indicators would range from the recognition of the role and rights of CSOs to their institutionalized participation in national decision-making processes and the level of civil society and SRHR input reflected in approved development policies and instruments such as PRSPs, Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs) and others. The assessment tool would also clearly identify which constituency (central government, parliament, CSO, etc.) is responsible for achieving the results.

As equal partners in country ownership efforts, CSOs also need to develop effective transparency and accountability mechanisms vis-à-vis the members of their own communities and constituencies as well as donors and recipient governments. The existence and availability of clear activity and financial reports are good examples of such mechanisms as is the capacity to undertake internal evaluations and the openness to be the subject of external reviews and audit processes.

To conclude, as a keystone of many new development financing mechanisms, country ownership is a principle that deserves continued effort. As the concept of country ownership continues to be debated and processes for its implementation continue to be developed, the SRHR and the broader civil society community have an important opportunity—through thoughtful development and implementation of country ownership principles—to strengthen their voice in the design and implementation of development strategies. This is especially

critical to SRHR issues, which require strong champions at the country level. The challenge is to ensure that donors and country governments are held accountable to commitments made. To meet that challenge, SRHR organizations must develop new knowledge and capacities in order to both advocate for a seat at the table and function effectively once there.

Notes

- 1 Vogel, C. 2006. *The Changing Face of Foreign Assistance: New Funding Paradigms Offer a Challenge and Opportunity for Family Planning*. Washington, DC: Population Action International.
- 2 Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. 2007. *2006 Survey on Monitoring the Paris Declaration, Overview of the Results: Pre-publication copy*. Paris: Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development.
- 3 World Bank. 2007. *Country Ownership*. Available at: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/PROJECTS/STRATEGIES/CDF/0,,contentMDK:20072933~menuPK:140843~pagePK:139301~piPK:139306~theSitePK:140576,00.html>Internet; last accessed 7 June 2007.
- 4 Millennium Challenge Corporation. 2007. *Millennium Challenge Corporation 2006 Annual Report*. Washington, DC: Millennium Challenge Corporation.
- 5 For a definition of civil society see: Mas de Xaxás, M. 2006. *Recommended Definition of Civil Society and Criteria for Civil Society Representation to the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition (RHSC)*. Washington, DC: Population Action International
- 6 The full text of the Paris Declaration is available at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/41/34428351.pdf>
- 7 DFID. 2006. *DFID's Medium Term Action Plan on Aid Effectiveness. Our response to the Paris Declaration. Donor Policy and Partnerships Team. Policy Division*. London: DFID.

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