

Problem

At the recent High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, the definition of “country ownership” was broadened to reflect a “whole of society” approach – a critical mechanism for building broad-based, inclusive country ownership. Increasing country ownership and stakeholder participation poses considerable challenges, reorienting and changing the dynamic of the aid relationship.

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Country Ownership

Recommendations & Actions

“Country ownership” is routinely highlighted as a key principle of good development practice, although there is a wide range of interpretations of the term. True country ownership is the full and effective participation of a country’s population via legislative bodies, civil society, the private sector, and local, regional and national government in conceptualizing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating development policies, programs and processes.¹ To support this principle and advance development effectiveness, the U.S. government should:

- **Develop a clear definition and operational guidelines for inclusive ownership**, applicable to all U.S. agencies implementing development assistance. Guidelines would help ensure that stakeholder participation is consistent and not left to the discretion of individual agencies or missions. They would also allow partner countries and implementers to adhere to a clear and uniform standard.
- **Ensure broad, inclusive and meaningful engagement of civil society** in consultations on Feed the Future, the Global Health Initiative, Country Development Cooperation Strategies, the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, and other new development initiatives. A transparent, consistent plan should be developed for inclusive, participatory, ongoing engagement of civil society, including feedback mechanisms to measure the impact and effectiveness of engagement by all stakeholders.
- **Continue diplomatic support for an enabling environment for civil society**, working with host governments, international and host country civil society organizations (CSOs) and other implementing partners to establish formal methods to ensure guidelines are followed. A strong enabling environment allows CSOs to thrive and builds more inclusive and transparent development.
- **Continue policy dialogue with U.S. nongovernmental organizations to monitor the ongoing implementation of country ownership principles** in current U.S. initiatives, with exchange about best practices on key issues such as local consultation, project governance mechanisms, capacity building and use of country systems.
- **Continue to promote and advocate for inclusive country ownership with its international partners.** By presenting the challenges and lessons learned in recent U.S. efforts to achieve country ownership, the United States can lead this important discussion with other donor countries, host countries and civil society.

Results

U.S. foreign assistance programs will be made more effective, conforming to internationally agreed upon principles of development effectiveness, and will be democratically owned by local communities and governments and therefore more sustainable.

Background²

At the simplest level, participation of both citizens and government in development efforts is at the heart of country ownership, allowing for better targeting of resources, strengthened accountability among the various stakeholders, and ultimately increased sustainability and success. Empowering and supporting effective states and citizens to take responsibility for their own development, using local systems and local resources to help countries become less reliant on external assistance, is key to “smart development.” Effective use of development assistance results in communities experiencing change they believe is good, in which they have a voice and that they are committed to sustaining.

For most NGOs, promoting broad-based country ownership is a core part of their mission and moral commitment to poverty alleviation. Far from an abstract principle, it is founded on years of experience, often working as donors in developing countries to build local capacity and engaging in participatory development. InterAction’s endorsement of country ownership is therefore central to its members’ commitment, not only to the aid effectiveness agenda, but also more broadly to the goal of development effectiveness.

Core Principles of Country Ownership

Although country ownership may look very different depending on the country context, an accumulating body of evidence points to the following universal elements that effectively support country ownership:

Enabling environment. An enabling environment for civil society is the broad backdrop that generally determines whether development assistance fails or succeeds. The extent to which an environment is enabling (or restrictive) of civil society depends on the legal framework in which CSOs operate (for example, freedom of expression and association, right to operate free from unwarranted state interference) and how donor governments and host country governments support CSOs with funding and engage them in strategic policy dialogue.

Transparency and accountability. Comparable, comprehensive, timely and accessible information for stakeholders is essential for effective engagement in the development process. Information-sharing by both governments and donors not only helps governments manage and take ownership of their own development, but equally importantly helps civil society, legislatures and others hold governments accountable. As a first step, donor countries need to provide clear information about their plans and programs in recipient countries to allow government, civil society organizations and citizens to be more effective and accountable in managing aid resources.

USAID and the Department of State have made significant progress on the issue of aid transparency (the U.S. Foreign Assistance Dashboard, with USAID and Department of State foreign assistance information, is one example), but it is still a mixed picture across agencies.

Consultation. Consultations are typically the initial way of engaging affected stakeholders. Consultations are the primary vehicle to solicit the input and expertise of the local stakeholders, generally the closest to the issues facing the country. Effective consultations, engaging a wide range of stakeholders and encouraging a diversity of input, are important because they ensure that program and strategy designs are well-informed and grounded in the local context, helping avoid the need for costly fixes later. Consultations in the U.S. can also bring a broader U.S. constituency and nongovernmental perspective to bear on development issues and help guide policy development. In many situations, however, consultations with limited inclusiveness, scope and accountability have tended to substitute for establishing real development partnerships.

Capacity building. In many cases, partner country groups and institutions may require additional support to effectively lead their development processes. In these cases it is necessary to develop or enhance the capacity of these organizations, in whatever areas necessary – financial, administrative, governance or other – to support their ability to effectively participate in the development process. Effective capacity building can take years, and can appear to slow down development efforts, running up against the demand for quick results. But there is strong evidence that taking the time to develop capable partners yields more sustainable and effective results.

Participation. At the broadest level, effective participation entails enabling stakeholders to have substantive input and involvement in decision making throughout development processes intended to benefit them. Participatory approaches provide the crucial foundation for sustainable development, ensuring the broad spectrum of society, including marginalized people and those living in poverty, are involved and have a stake in development processes and plans. An enabling environment, transparency, meaningful consultation and capacity building are all critical to ensure effective participation.

1 Definition developed by InterAction’s Aid Effectiveness Working Group.

2 From InterAction’s policy brief “Country Ownership: Moving from Rhetoric to Action,” available at <http://www.interaction.org/country-ownership>.