

Round Table 1: Ownership



Partner countries exercise effective leadership over their development policies and strategies, and coordinate development actions.
The Paris Declaration

Key Points from the Evaluation

1. In most of the countries examined, effective country ownership of development cooperation is almost certainly stronger than the norm, and it has been reinforced to some degree by the use of the Paris Declaration. Political engagement and leadership in setting the terms of aid relationships is most important in determining how much the country will exercise ownership in practice.

2. Within national political and administrative systems in the eight partner countries, competing interests and values also come into play in the exercise of ownership. In practice, ownership remains heavily weighted in favour of central players rather than sector or sub-national players (provincial and local authorities) even in subject areas that are supposed to be devolved. The engagement of the wider society, and often legislatures, is assessed as weaker than it should be.

3. In all the cases of donors' performance examined, the Paris Declaration provides a significant reinforcing influence and climate for change, but is not a decisive influence on its own. Three of the nine bilateral agencies examined can be said to have re-shaped their culture, organization and much of their behaviour to put country ownership first. The other six are found to be in various stages of acceptance and transformation, struggling with serious obstacles of quite diverse kinds. Two or three are found to need further fundamental changes, and/or an explicitly gradual approach to implementing the Paris Declaration.

4. Political and political/bureaucratic interests and values are key factors in explaining the varied responses of the various bilateral donor agencies to the drive for greater country ownership. As in partner countries, the donors also confront a variety of competing interests and values at home that can stand in the way of their "letting go" and reducing past degrees of donor control and leadership of aid. Some of the donor studies underline how other interests in aid programs, beyond aid effectiveness, such as foreign policy or commercial considerations, remain influential. One important underlying implication of these continuing political stakes for all donor countries is the reminder that they all retain some levels and types of "ownership" for their aid programs – albeit as "minority partners" behind the effective leadership of partner countries.

5. To remain useful in advancing the implementation of the Paris Declaration the concept of ownership needs to be approached not as an absolute condition, but as a continuum or process. The Monitoring Survey's indicator on ownership relates to only one simple dimension of this complex picture and is found in a number of studies to be a necessary but far from sufficient measure.¹

6. Approaching ownership analytically, as a process, may help to reduce the subjectivity of this debate, and avoid ownership becoming a political football or receiving mere lip-service. Taken together, the Declaration's original four sub-commitments on ownership go further in clarifying it than is sometimes recognized.

“The development partners expect a great deal from the Government in order to carry out its coordination roles.

Senegal report ”

“Real and pro-active steering of coordination by the country is considered to be the exception.

France report ”

“... the evaluation team supports the 2006 findings that 'ownership capacity largely resides in National Treasury and many key national Departments, outside of which ownership/ leadership is 'patchy'.

South Africa report ”

Key lessons

1. To counter the growing risks of bureaucratization and “aid effectiveness fatigue” that many of the evaluations warn against, concrete measures are needed to re-energize and sustain high-level political engagement in the implementation of aid effectiveness reforms.

¹ Indicator 1: “At least 75% of partner countries have operational development strategies. (By 2010)”

2. Successful implementation of the Declaration's reforms is much more likely in countries where understanding and involvement are extended beyond narrow circles of specialists, as has been shown in some promising advances in involving legislatures and civil society in both partner and donor countries.

3. "Champions" in countries often play key roles in successful implementation when they ensure that the necessary capacity is deployed, and lead the vital drive to align aid with the country's budgetary and accountability systems. Among donors, the changes in regulations and practices to delegate greater authority and capacity to field offices have been the most important enabling conditions for successful implementation.

4. Strengthening both the actual capacities of partner country systems to manage aid effectively, and the international recognition of those capacities where they already exist, are now key requirements for advancing the Paris Declaration reforms.

5. The integrated, balanced and reciprocal character of the full package of Paris Declaration commitments needs to be strongly re-affirmed and applied, and the Monitoring Survey and indicators placed in their proper perspective as part of the overall agenda.

6. To offset the image of the Declaration as a "one size fits all" prescription for rigid compliance, there is a need to reiterate and demonstrate that its guidance can and should be adapted to particular country circumstances, while also clarifying the important common features to be maintained.

Key Recommendations

The following steps, derived from the findings and conclusions of the evaluation, are recommended for the remainder of the Paris Declaration review period up to 2010, establishing a clear basis for the five-year assessment of progress and further course corrections at that time.

It is recommended that **partner country authorities:**

1. Announce, before the end of 2008, a manageable number of prioritized steps they will take to strengthen their leadership of aid relationships up to 2010, in the light of lessons from monitoring, evaluations and other stocktaking to date.

These should be transparent measures that reflect these countries' own capacities and domestic accountability needs, capture the benefits of learning, and give guidance to development partners, against which their efforts can also be assessed. Given capacity limitations, this may involve setting out sequenced approaches for asserting and exercising their ownership and leadership of development and cooperation strategies and requiring development partners to work within those systems.

2. Build on the interim reviews of implementation in 2008 to ensure that they have in place a continuing transparent mechanism, ideally anchored in the legislature, for political monitoring and public participation around aid management and reform.

3. Give clear guidance to donors who are supporting capacity-strengthening on their priorities for assistance to manage aid more effectively, consistent with their main development concerns.

4. Work out, by 2010 at the latest, adapted systems of managing for results that will best serve their domestic planning, management and accountability needs, and provide a sufficient basis for harnessing donors' contributions.

It is recommended that **development partner or donor authorities:**

5. Update their legislatures and publics in 2008 on progress to date with aid effectiveness reforms, underlining the need and plans for further concrete changes to be implemented before 2010 to accept and support country leadership in aid implementation and greater donor harmonisation.

6. Before the end of 2008, announce their further detailed plans to delegate by 2010 to their field offices sufficient decision-making authority, appropriately skilled staff and other resources to support and participate fully in better-aligned and harmonized country-led cooperation.

7. Specify their concrete planned steps to improve, by 2010 at the latest, the timeliness, completeness and accuracy of their reporting and projections for aid flows to feed into the planning, budgeting and reporting cycles of partner countries, together with other donors. Make the needed provisions for multi-year allocations, commitments, or firm projections.

8. Provide supplementary budgets, staffing and training up to 2010 to help their own programs adjust for the transitional and new demands and transaction costs and learning needs that are being reported as major concerns in implementing the Paris agenda.

9. Allocate special resources (budgets and coordinated technical assistance) to support and reinforce countries' prioritized efforts to strengthen their own capacities to implement more effective cooperation. Work with partners to design and manage other interim means of implementation (such as project implementation units) so that they steadily enhance capacity and country ownership.