

The deeper struggle over country ownership

Thomas Carothers

The world of international development assistance is brimming with broad concepts that sound widely appealing and essentially uncontroversial. Some of these concepts pertain to specific areas of aid programming, such as civil society, the rule of law, governance and decentralisation. Others are operational principles as well as programmatic areas, such as the striking focus throughout the aid community in recent years on accountability, transparency, inclusion and participation. These operational principles not only constitute common ground among the many different organisations making up the aid world, but also appeal as bridges across the divide between providers and recipients. After decades of sharp Cold War divisions and ideological arguments, the aid world gravitated strongly in the 1990s toward a strong preference for consensus and shared principles, at least at the public level – a preference which has continued since.

Yet when one looks hard at the specific meaning of any of these concepts and principles, one quickly finds very different – and sometimes conflicting – ideas at work underneath the surface of apparent consensus. For some aid providers for example, rule of law means an emphasis on order and certain key legal institutions, like the courts and police. Others, however, see rule of law as rooted in the empowerment of individuals and binding constraints on institutions. Similarly wide differences animate work on accountability. For some, it is a fundamentally political concept attached to democratic processes – above all, elections. For others, it is a procedural endeavour regulating narrowly defined, apolitical governance functions, like budget management.

Ownership is one more of these broad concepts that have become pervasive in the aid world during the past two decades – widely appealing, hard to disagree with, relevant to providers and recipients of aid alike, and constantly invoked. Yet, as with others in this category of broad concepts, the apparent consensus on ownership masks deep divisions. The debates in recent years at the Third and Fourth High-Level Forums on aid, at Accra and Busan, over whether ownership is best conceived of as “governmental ownership”, “country ownership” or “democratic ownership” are a manifestation of this fact. But the divisions go much deeper than such

linguistic skirmishes might indicate. The concept of ownership is in fact at the heart of a deep-reaching struggle between two conflicting imperatives shaping the contemporary domain of international assistance: the push to make ownership the basic feature of international aid, and movement toward viewing developing country societies rather than just developing country governments as the true partners of international assistance.

1. The ownership imperative

The first of these two imperatives is the drive within the aid community to make ownership a cardinal principle of aid effectiveness. It is useful to briefly review the emergence of this imperative. The growing emphasis over the last 20 years in aid circles on ownership reflects the merging of two distinct developments. To start with, the 1990s saw rising concern amongst donor countries regarding the effectiveness of aid. After the Cold War, the security rationale for aid had withered. Western aid providers suddenly found themselves having to convince sceptical politicians and publics that aid is useful in development. Accordingly, research on aid effectiveness quickly multiplied. A major finding of such research, notably from work by David Dollar, was that aid is effective when recipient governments are committed to reforms (Burnside and Dollar, 2000). This finding led directly to an understanding of ownership as a critical element of aid effectiveness – providing aid for reforms to a government genuinely committed to “good policies” meant in effect, providing aid to a government that was committed to “owning” the aid.

During the same period, recipient country governments became more vocal in their frustration with the supply-driven nature of Western aid and its resulting deficiencies – agendas determined by donors, aid poorly designed for local contexts, competing donor agendas in a single country and so forth. This assertiveness contributed to the emergence in the early 2000s of a new international dialogue on aid, taking form first in the discussions surrounding the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals and then elaborated in 2003 at the First High-Level Forum on Harmonisation in Rome and in 2005, at the Second High-Level Forum that produced the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Insistence by recipient governments on ownership as a central principle of good aid practice was an essential feature of this new international recipient-provider dialogue on aid.

In short, the push for ownership came both from providers and recipients of aid, rooted in a shared concern for making aid more effective. The object of concern, however, was different for both sides: providers of aid wanted to be sure that *recipient governments* assumed responsibility for using aid well; recipients of aid wanted to be sure that *provider governments* assumed responsibility for giving aid well. The new emphasis on ownership was a way to bridge these two perspectives.

2. The imperative of diversified partnership

In the same years that the ownership imperative was emerging, a different line of evolution was also at work in the aid world, producing a second imperative that has ended up bumping up against, and sometimes openly conflicting with, the ownership drive. It consists of a shift among aid practitioners away from the assumption that recipient governments are exclusive partners in the development enterprise. This imperative entails recognition that in many cases, aid providers must find other local partners if aid is to be successful.

The first step in this line of evolution was the rise of the governance agenda in the aid community in the 1990s. Aid providers embraced the idea that poorly functioning government in aid-receiving countries is often a root cause of underdevelopment (as opposed to a lack of capital, underlying structural conditions or a lack of technical know-how) and that aid should focus on the workings of recipient governments. This first step spawned a wave of aid programming aimed at strengthening governing institutions in developing countries, usually through the provision of technical assistance and institutional funding.

The second – and very crucial – next step in this line of evolution followed naturally. When aid providers tried to strengthen governance in developing countries, they frequently achieved only very limited results. Their programmes assumed goodwill on the part of governing institutions, but ran up against the unpleasant fact that resistance to reform was often deeply rooted within the governing institutions themselves, rendering technical assistance useless in many cases. As a result, aid providers began looking for ways to nurture and support impetus for reform within societies more broadly, via organisations and citizens outside of governing institutions who would exert pressure against power holders for positive change. Aid providers began directing growing shares of their assistance to civil society organisations that they believed would exert pressure for governance reforms. This “demand-side” aid usually meant support for independent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) advocating particular socio-economic reforms or better governance values, like transparency and anti corruption.

For some aid providers, like the World Bank, the shift away from the traditional provision of aid almost exclusively to governments has been a cautious and partial one though still significant. For others, including some of the northern European donors, it became a major shift, with as much as 25% of their assistance now going to non-governmental organisations rather than governments. The government of Sweden, for example, began moving its aid in some countries, such as Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, away from the government altogether.

This shift towards directly assisting civil society through socio-economic aid aligned with the somewhat separate domain of aid efforts aimed at supporting democratisation. Since its origins in the 1980s, the democracy side of the aid community has viewed civil society as a natural partner for its assistance. Though democracy aid does go to governing institutions, such as aid for parliamentary strengthening, judicial reform and decentralisation, democracy promoters have always questioned the traditional paradigm of aid going exclusively or predominantly to recipient governments. Watching socio-economic aid specialists gradually beginning to direct aid to many organisations outside of governments during the past decade, many democracy aid specialists felt that the mainstream aid community was belatedly catching up to a basic insight they had long embraced – that aid should be viewed as belonging to society as a whole, rather than to the ruling government alone.

3. The clash of imperatives

These two imperatives emerged simultaneously but somewhat separately in the aid world. On one hand, the aid community made a steady march toward the principle of ownership, in part through the progressive series of agreements emanating from the various high-level forums in Rome, Paris, and Accra. Yet at the same time, at least some major aid actors – especially northern European donors, but also the World Bank and other multilaterals – were evolving toward the view that smart aid meant directing at least some aid not to governments, but instead to people and organisations outside of the governmental sphere who can be partners of development processes and challenge governmental institutions to do better in implementing the reforms. Most aid organisations, however, tried to avoid public acknowledgment of or even open discussion of the deep tension between these two important imperatives, following the general tendency of the international aid community to try to maintain a broad ethos of consensus.

Tension resulting from the contradictions between these two imperatives has surfaced in the growing debates and disputes over the definition of ownership in international aid forums, in particular the efforts in the run-up to the Fourth High-Level Forum at Busan in 2011 to define ownership as “democratic” (Faust, 2010). The idea here, of course, was that the term “democratic” would be understood to mean that governments need to take account of the wishes of their people in determining development priorities – and in a deeper sense, that recipient societies as a whole “own” aid rather than just governments themselves.

But the tensions between the two imperatives are breaking out now in much more serious ways. A rapidly growing number of governments in every region that aid reaches are taking measures to restrict external aid

to domestic civil society organisations. These measures range from legal restrictions and public denunciations of such aid to different forms of active harassment of persons and organisations engaged in such assistance. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law documents legal restrictions relating to foreign civil society assistance and has documented dozens of cases of such restrictive measures in recent years.¹ Attention to this phenomenon has risen to such a degree that President Barack Obama and more than 20 other national leaders issued a call to action at the UN General Assembly in September 2013, aimed at pushing back against the growing trend of constraints on enabling environments for civil society (White House, 2013).

Governments creating restrictions on external assistance for civil society usually justify such measures by accusing Western aid providers of political interference. For example, they claim that aid to human rights organisations is political activity in the cloak of putatively apolitical civil society assistance. Yet while concerns over political meddling by external actors may indeed be a principal motivation, these recipient governments are also often spurred by anger against aid providers, who they feel have changed the basic deal that they thought was an unshakable principle of international assistance: aid providers are looking to actors other than governments as an integral part of developmental change and embracing them as productive partners, often doing so without asking for permission of national governments. In short, the growing pushback from recipient governments arises from their perception that the ownership imperative is being violated.

This has been the case in Egypt, for example, where starting in 2012, the government moved against a number of aid organisations operating in the country, accusing a number of political interference in Egyptian domestic politics and pursuing criminal prosecutions against their in-country representatives.² What stirred the Egyptian government to take these unprecedented actions was not just the substance of what these organisations were doing, but the fact that Western aid providers had decided to work directly with many parts of Egyptian society other than the government, taking away “their” (i.e. the Egyptian government’s) aid and giving it to other Egyptians. Egyptian power holders, in other words, discovered to their dismay that Egypt’s political revolution not only meant potentially tremendous changes in the organisation and distribution of power in Egyptian political life – but also a significant change in how Egypt’s traditional aid partners intended to go about providing assistance.

4. Reacting to the clash

Faced with this sweeping trend of pushback against external aid for civil society, the aid community is only starting to formulate a response. The instinct of some practitioners is to pull back – to retreat to the safer ground of old approaches when aid went only to governments or organisations chosen by the national government to be aid recipients. Though this may be a preferable course for some risk-averse aid providers, if adopted generally it would be a serious setback for international aid. It would mean retreating from crucial principles of human rights that independent civil society often embodies and defends. It would also mean giving up on the basic insight that has driven the evolution of aid away from the old pattern of treating governments as exclusive aid partners: the understanding that positive social, political and economic change in any society just as often originates from outside the national government as from within it and that if aid is to be an effective facilitator of such change, it must proceed through a diverse range of partnerships with nongovernmental and governmental actors alike.

Thus for practitioners faced with day-to-day-level issues concerning the scope of ownership and the question of aiding nongovernmental organisations that operate outside the direct control of governments, it is crucial for them to:

- Be aware of the structural tension between the principle of ownership and the important trend of direct aid support to non-governmental organisations.
- Be knowledgeable about the trend toward closing space for civil society and civil society assistance so that connections can be drawn between specific actions that a government takes to limit or block direct support for NGOs and the broader global tendency of pushback against civil society assistance.
- Be willing to directly address such tensions and issues with aid receiving governments – avoid engaging in “self-censorship” of aid approaches, that is to say, holding back from supporting civic groups directly for fear of offending recipient governments.
- Learn about the range of adaptive and ameliorative measures that aid providers are taking to limit the effects of pushback against civil society assistance, from support for activities to improve national enabling environments for civil society development, to special funds that have become available to support civil society organisations that are coming under pressure or attack in countries around the world.

Notes

1. See the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law's website, www.icnl.org (ICNL, undated).
2. See www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/egypt-convicts-us-ngo-workers-sam-lahood.

Bibliography

- Burnside, Craig and David Dollar (2000), "Aid, policies, and growth", *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 90(4), pp. 847-68.
- Faust, Jörg (2010), "Policy experiments, democratic ownership and development assistance", *Development Policy Review*, Vol. 28(5), pp. 515-34.
- ICNL (undated), International Center for Not-for-Profit Law website, www.icnl.org.
- White House (23 September 2013), "Remarks by President Obama at Civil Society Roundtable", White House website, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/23/remarks-president-obama-civil-society-roundtable.