

Ownership in Focus?

Discussion paper for a planned evaluation

Stefan Molund

**Department for Evaluation
and Internal Audit**

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Sida Studies in Evaluation 00/5

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This report is published in *Sida Studies in Evaluation*, a series comprising methodologically oriented studies commissioned by Sida. A second series, *Sida Evaluation*, covers evaluations of Swedish development co-operation. Both series are administered by the Department for Evaluation and Internal Audit.

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Sida Studies in Evaluation 00/5
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Registration no.: UTV 1998-01840
Date of Final Report: November, 2000
Printed in Stockholm, Sweden 2000
ISBN 91 586 8870 6
ISSN 1402-215X

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OECD/DAC. Strengthening Development Partnership: A Working Checklist

1 Introduction

According to a wide body of international opinion, increased partner country “ownership” is one of the main prerequisites of more effective development assistance. Increased ownership can also be regarded as a development goal in itself and even as a measure of “development.”

In Sweden the debate has focused on the presumed connection between partner country ownership and aid effectiveness. The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Sida have indicated that they will promote a new kind of development assistance relation, one where donors step back and partner country owners take the lead. The debate on development co-operation is in essential respects a debate about agency and responsibility. The established Swedish view is that donors should support the development efforts of their partners, not directly drive the process of change. The primary responsibility for improving living conditions in partner countries rests with the partner countries themselves. A division of labour corresponding to these principles is viewed as a *sine qua non* of successful development co-operation.

This paper takes a closer look at the concept of ownership as it has been defined by Sida and others and reviews some established beliefs about the causes and effects of weak partner country ownership. It concludes with a presentation of a set of issues that should be considered in an evaluation concerned with ownership¹. Its main purpose is to encourage discussion among Sida staff and others about the focus and scope of a planned formative evaluation of ownership in development co-operation supported by Sida. As it has been planned, the evaluation will *describe* development co-operation in an ownership perspective, *explain* identified discrepancies between ownership in policy and ownership in practice, and *suggest* ways by which Sida, single-handed or conjointly with others, could achieve closer harmony between concept and action.

In the study thus planned, UTV is primarily addressing itself to Sida, but the study should also be capable of interesting Sida’s co-operation partners, always provided that it is designed with their interests and concerns clearly in view. The question of how interested parties in the partner countries can and ought to be involved in the evaluation remains to be discussed.

2 Sida’s view of “ownership”

In *Sida at Work* (1998: 16–17), a handbook authoritatively describing Sida’s working methods, the concept of ownership is explained as follows:

In this handbook we talk about “ownership” of projects or activities in a way which goes further than the legal definition of ownership. In order to be able to say that a partner in co-operation is the *owner* of a project, the partner must have full rights to use the resources provided within the framework laid down in the project agreement. But this is not enough. The co-operation partner must also be prepared to assume full responsibility, participate actively in the work, and be ready to implement the project on its own initiative. Complete ownership can also require that political bodies, such as parliament, the government, local communities as well as the target group support the project and participate in decision-making processes. Different parties successively participating more actively and assuming greater responsibility can gradually extend the ownership of a project during the course of project implementation.

¹ A draft of this paper has been circulated for comments. The response to the idea of evaluating Sida-supported programmes and projects in a perspective of ownership was generally positive. A number of more specific comments have been incorporated in this version.

The “ownership” of development therefore varies between different levels and areas, from government policy to various aspects of a project. Ownership can also lie with different groups of people. A government can own the long-term policy decisions in a sector of society while a regional administration or trade association can own the decision to start a project and to implement it. People living in a village, members of a farmers’ society, or a group of small businessmen can assume “popular” ownership as regards how a credit project is to be organised and to function.

The handbook also gives us a definition of the term *project owner*:

The project owner is the party that requests support for its project and that is responsible for the planning and implementation of the project, by having, for example, the organisation and staff for the task. The project owner can be, e.g. a government agency, a voluntary organisation, a company or a research institution. The project owner also finances part, often a large part, of the costs of the project. (p. 15)

The above can be sorted out in a few points:

- a. The *object* of ownership – that which is owned – is often a project or part of a project, but it can also be a programme or a decision relating to a project or a programme. The “development” of a country can also be owned. In the handbook, however, the object of ownership is usually described as a project. The term project is taken in a broad sense to cover “anything from trying out a new method to supporting development in an entire sector or even balance-of-payment support” (p. 14).
- b. The *subject* of ownership – “the project owner” when the object is a project – is domiciled in the partner country. As it is defined in *Sida at Work* the term owner cannot be applied to Sida and other external actors. The distinction between donor and owner is primarily one of responsibilities. While the owner is responsible for the project, the donor is responsible for its own work as a donor. The first and foremost of the donor’s tasks is to make sure that aid funds are not wasted on bad projects. Donors should monitor the projects that they support and provide their principals with information about project results. In relation to co-operation partners their main obligation is to make sure that contributions are smoothly transferred. The responsibilities of project planning and implementation belong to the project owners, not to the donors.
- c. The owner may be a government, national authority, an NGO, a business enterprise, a research institution or members of a local association, a grassroots organisation. The handbook gives the impression that every stakeholder in the partner country whose co-operation or support is required for the success of a project can or should be regarded as an owner of that project. Often there is a hierarchy of owners, with owners at different levels owning different components or aspects of a project. As a rule, however, the ownership of a project is primarily vested in Sida’s co-operation partner, the organisation in the partner country with which Sida concludes the project agreement.
- d. The preconditions for *the relation between subject and object* being describable as ownership vary according to the nature of what is owned as well as according to the nature of the owner. Where the ownership of Sida’s co-operation partners is concerned, all or some of the following conditions have to be satisfied. (No corresponding conditions are stated for other types of ownership.)
 - The project owner requests support for the project.
 - The project owner has full rights to use the resources provided within the framework laid down in the project agreement.
 - The project owner helps to finance the project.

- The project owner is responsible for the planning and implementation of the project, by providing personnel and organisation for example.
 - The project owner is committed to the project in both word and deed. He is prepared to assume full responsibility, participate actively in the work, and is ready to initiate and lead the implementation of the project.
- e. Ownership of projects includes commitment to agreed project objectives and procedures. Although not explicitly stated in the handbook, this is clearly an important part of the concept. An actor who uses project assets for purposes not in keeping with predefined objectives, for example, or whose involvement is otherwise at variance with an agreed project model, cannot be regarded as a project owner, even if he has requested support for the project, has helped to finance it and satisfies Sida criteria of ownership in other respects.
- f. The handbook notes that partner country ownership is not a condition established once and for all. Ownership can be strengthened over time, partly as a result of the circle of stakeholders actively involved gradually expanding, but also as a result of individual stakeholders gradually assuming greater responsibility. Of course, changes can also occur in the opposite direction, though this is not mentioned in the handbook.
- g. The handbook says that ownership in the development co-operation sense “goes further than the legal definition of ownership”. The meaning of this is unclear. Ownership in the legal sense is primarily a bundle of rights concerned with use, control and transfer of objects. The owner is the person who, within limits defined by the law, is entitled to use an object, entitled to decide the extent to which that same object can be used by others and entitled to transfer both these rights to others by will, gift, sale and so on. The handbook does not explain how ownership in the development co-operation sense can be regarded as a further development of ownership in this meaning of the term. What strikes the reader is rather the lack of continuity between the two concepts. First, legal ownership does not seem to be a precondition for ownership in the Sida sense. Apparently, there can be development co-operation ownership even if the owners do not have legal rights of use, control and transfer, or even if their legal rights in these regards are quite limited. Secondly, whereas in a civil law context no attention is paid to the owner’s attitude to his property – even an irresponsible owner is an owner - a prudent and responsible attitude toward that which is owned seems to be a core meaning of ownership in the development co-operation sense.

3 Three guiding principles

3.1 In *Sida at Work* the concept of ownership is introduced along with three “general principles” to be followed by Sida when working with projects and programmes. The first of these principles, consisting of three parts, is that a) Sida staff must try to ensure that the implications of ownership are clearly defined at all levels of development co-operation, b) the rights and duties of ownership are placed at a level that is as close to the target group and other affected parties as possible, and c) the ownership of target groups and other local interests is respected and strengthened:

Sida’s staff has the task of working actively to ensure that ownership is clarified at the different levels of development co-operation, that it lies as close as possible to the target group and other interested parties, and that their ownership is respected and strengthened (p. 17).

The second of the principles puts the task of promoting partner country ownership in relation to Sida's responsibility to make sure that supported projects and programmes attain their objectives and that funds provided by Sweden are well spent. The obligation to exercise control is an obligation towards the Swedish Parliament and the Swedish Government that cannot be ignored, but it must not be exercised in such a manner that partner country owners are deprived of their ownership. Hence, there is a general principle that the two concerns must be properly balanced against one another:

In relation to the parties that participate in each project, Sida's staff has the task of finding a practical, feasible balance between promoting ownership and exercising of control. (Ibid. 18)

The handbook does not explain in detail how a concern with control may come into conflict with efforts to strengthen partner country ownership or vice versa. The exercise of control for the purpose of enhancing partner country ownership of projects supported by Sida is not discussed. As the account of Sida's principles for assessing project proposals in a later chapter makes clear, however, ownership should be a major consideration in the control of projects at entry point. By carefully screening project proposals in the perspective of ownership, Sida staff is expected to ensure that only projects satisfying basic ownership requirements are accepted for support. Presumably, ownership should also be a concern in the monitoring of projects that have passed the test and been accepted for support. In the discussion of the principle above, however, control and ownership are set against one another.

The third and last of the principles says that Sida should try to select forms of co-operation that are maximally conducive to partner country ownership, notably sector programme support and project support with a strong element of "popular ownership":

Sida's staff has the task of actively promoting sector programme support and support which promotes popular ownership by the target group and other interested parties. (Ibid. 19).

As it is used in *Sida at Work*, "popular ownership" is a near synonym for "popular participation". There is "popular ownership" when representatives of the target group are actively engaged in the organisation and implementation of project activities- mere consultation is not enough. According to the handbook, Sida staff should pro-actively work to strengthen ownership by target groups and other interested parties even when the project initiative comes from the partner country government. It is not explained how this might be done, but, presumably, using dialogue to influence the partner country government to adopt a participatory project approach would generally be regarded as the right way to do it.

3.2 The connection between sector programme support and partner country ownership is further explained in *Sida's Policy for Sector Programme Support and Provisional Guidelines*, a complement to *Sida at Work*. Here we learn that neither project support nor general macro-economic support can solve current development problems. In many countries project support is itself a major problem:

In many countries project support has reached the end of the road. There are too many projects and they are too fragmented. Each has its own routines and time schedules for planning, follow-up and evaluation. Project administration takes up far too much of the partner countries' time and resources; projects are difficult to direct towards national objectives, and in practice they are subjected to far too great an extent to the controls of the various financiers. The result is a lack of national ownership and control. Quite simply it is necessary to find new forms of co-operation and co-ordination between local and external parties. (p. 15)

According to the *Guidelines*, sector programme support is the answer to these problems, at least in principle. Subordinating donor support to the regular domestic system for policy-making and

administration in the partner country, it has clear advantages over project support and sector support of a more traditional kind. It facilitates donor co-ordination and does away with stand-alone projects, it diminishes the administrative burden of the partner country, and it facilitates long-term planning and use of resources in the partner country. In these and other ways it greatly strengthens national ownership.

In many countries, however, sector programmes cannot be established right away. Economic, political and administrative requirements of various kinds must be satisfied before full-blown sector programme support can be introduced. There must also be change on the donors' side. Sida, along with other donors, must acquire new analytical skills and learn to co-operate in new ways. Like other donors, Sida must also accept that it will not be possible to follow up the use and results of its own financial contributions to the same extent as in project support.

4 Ownership and partnership

These statements about ownership should be set in relation to the connected concept of development partnership. As explained in the Government paper *Afrika i förändring. En förnyad Afrikapolitik inför 2000-talet (Africa in change. A renewed Swedish policy for Africa on the eve of the new millennium. Skr. 1997/98)*, the current idea of partnership is born from an understanding that relations between donors and recipients must be put on a new and more equal footing. Partnership, according to this paper, is a relationship grounded in common values and mutual trust. It is a relationship where "goals, conditions, obligations, roles and responsibilities" are clearly defined and mutually acknowledged, and where the parties show each other respect and deal with each other as equals (pp. 74–75).

Development partnerships conforming to this model cannot be established without far-reaching reforms of existing modes of co-operation. According to the Government paper, the following are areas where change is urgently needed:

African leadership and ownership. There can be no genuine partnership unless external assistance is clearly subordinated to domestic priorities and plans.

Popular support and participation. In many countries policies and programmes for development have lacked popular legitimacy and support. A more extensive process of consultation and participation is needed. Development programmes must be grounded in domestic political processes involving the government, parliament, and the media.

Improved donor co-ordination. Without improved donor co-ordination, ideally under domestic leadership, the problems of weak partner country ownership cannot be solved.

More sector- and budget support. This is also related to the problem of weak ownership. Partner country governments cannot handle the present multitude of donor projects. Sector- and budget support is necessary to ease their administrative burdens.

Simplified procedures. Disparate donor requirements for reporting, procurement, disbursement, etc. are another impediment to partner country ownership.

Terms of co-operation clearly articulated in formal agreements. Partners should know what to expect from each other. The objectives of the co-operation as well as agreed forms of follow-up and evaluation should be clearly defined in formal agreements.

Coherence between different areas of politics. Donor country policies regarding trade, development co-operation, security, migration, etc. should be consistent with one another and mutually supportive.

Rewarding achievements. Interaction between donors and recipients should be clearly oriented towards the achievement of results. There should be a results based system of performance incentives; resources for development co-operation should be used to reward good performance.

Debt relief to the poorest countries. Without debt relief the poorest and most indebted of the countries in Africa will not be able to solve their problems.

As this list shows, ownership and partnership are overlapping concepts. A difference between them is that the outer boundaries of donor-recipient relationships are more clearly articulated in discussions of partnership. In the description of partnership in the Government paper shared values are mentioned before anything else. Outside the framework of international laws and conventions partnership is not conceivable. Similarly, the points about contractual clarity and performance incentives remind us that even where the partner country occupies the so-called driver's seat, as required by the ownership agenda, the donor wants to have a say. At the very least the donor needs to know that the partner is heading in the agreed direction and that agreed rules of conduct are not violated on the way.

As they are understood in Swedish development discourse, then, partnership appears to be the more comprehensive of the two concepts. It covers partner country ownership and it also embraces the claims of the donor. As stressed in the Government paper, however, partner country ownership is a prerequisite of partnership. Without partner country ownership there cannot be real partnership.

5 Retrospect

Questions of partner country ownership have long been discussed in Swedish development assistance, though in other terms. In SIDA's case, *Rollutredningen*, (The Role Inquiry) at the end of the 1980s was a milestone. In a comment on this inquiry about SIDA's role in relation to partner countries, Director-General Tham stressed the traditional Swedish view of development assistance as helping recipient countries to help themselves, but noted also that SIDA had not always been able to translate this principle into practice. Competing concerns had often carried more weight:

One obvious point of departure must be that the recipient of assistance is himself responsible for projects and programmes. Our role is to assist, support, help others to help themselves or whatever we wish to call it. This, of course, has all the time been a point of departure but in reality we are constantly forced into compromises and lapses. It is in the nature and structure of development assistance that the donors – for a large number and variety of reasons – tend to “take over” too much of the activities and, so to speak, to push the recipient's responsibility to one side. This is often done for the commendable purpose of promoting “efficiency” or accelerating the disbursement of funds. In the long term, however, it is destructive of the recipient's own capacity and ability, at the same time as it makes him more dependent on assistance (Carl Tham 7.9.1988).

The concluding document of the inquiry, presented in 1989, strongly affirms that assumption of greater responsibility in the recipient country is a precondition of long-term effectiveness and sustainability of the assistance:

As regards the allocation of roles between SIDA and the recipient country, one finds that SIDA has increasingly tended to assume a large share of responsibility for the implementation of assistance in certain countries. There are natural explanations for this, but it also means that SIDA has sometimes taken upon itself a role which we have difficulty in coping with, because it is often found that this assumption of responsibility does not improve the results of development assistance. It may seem irresponsible to transfer a larger share of responsibility to the recipient country when we know that the recipient country is inefficient in a number of respects. The answer is that we have no alternative if we want to achieve lasting development effects. Sida cannot and should not take upon itself the prime responsibility for development activities in a recipient country. (Rollutredningen, SIDA, 1989, p. 6).

The views expressed in the report from the inquiry were incorporated in *Handbok 90* (1990), SIDA's equivalent of *Sida at Work*. According to that handbook, Swedish assistance was to be based on the principle of the recipient country having prime responsibility for its own development. Development assistance was a contribution to the recipient country's own development efforts and nothing else:

The recipient country is always responsible for its own development efforts. SIDA's main task is to assess and monitor development assistance projects and programmes and to plan and guide the Swedish contribution to them. Sida, then, does not carry out development assistance projects; instead it contributes to them a variety of resources. (Handbok 90, 1990, p. 10)

The practical implications of this are expounded chapter by chapter. One of the main points of *Handbok 90* is that Swedish support should be channelled through the partner country's regular administrative machinery, and, as much as possible, make use of local resources. According to the handbook, lack of administrative and technical capacity is the main reason why, in many cases, partner countries cannot assume full responsibility for projects supported by SIDA.

The handbook lays down the following principles and guidelines, most of which are similar to more recent statements and principles:

- Project proposals that are not given priority by the relevant authorities in the recipient country are as a rule to be rejected. The partner country's commitment to the proposal shall be the first and most fundamental test in SIDA's assessment process. Its readiness to contribute resources of its own can be a yardstick of the degree of urgency. (p. 66)
- The capacity of partner countries for assuming real responsibility for development assistance shall be strengthened through support to their administrative and organisational development. This is described as one of SIDA's long-term objectives. (pp. 43, 106)
- SIDA should not support "free-standing" projects. Whenever possible, Swedish support should be channelled through regular administrative structures. When needed, measures for strengthening the administrative system of the partner country should be included in the Swedish support. (p. 43)
- During the preparation phase, SIDA should make an assessment of management capacity and steering systems within relevant ministries, authorities with project responsibility and project management. Normally the following should be covered: the competence of local personnel, existing routines for resource transfer, competence and routines for the procurement of goods and services, internal steering systems and working procedures, relations of the project to the ministry concerned, the need of the project management for Swedish support. (p. 43)
- The main responsibility for procuring goods and services for SIDA-funded projects should rest with the recipient country. External resources should not be used until the possibilities of using domestic resources have been exhausted. Where needed, SIDA should give support to the recipient country's capacity for managing the procurement of goods and services. (pp. 95-6)

- Technical assistance through expatriate personnel should be avoided as far as possible. This is a development assistance instrument that ought not to be used until other means of providing support have been investigated. (p. 98)
- The follow-up of SIDA-funded projects and programmes ought as far as possible to be adapted to the recipient country's own rules and routines for reporting. (p. 107)
- Partner countries are responsible for monitoring and follow-up of projects supported by SIDA. Partner country representatives should also participate in evaluations of such projects. (p. 118)
- Questions of responsibility should be clearly regulated in formal agreements between the partner country and the donor and in contracts between the project management consultant and the organisation responsible for the project in the recipient country. (p. 43)

6 Other definitions

6.1. The definition of ownership in *Sida at Work* is not the only one possible. Nobody questions that ownership in the development assistance context has to do with the influence exerted on development co-operation by the parties involved and their assumption of responsibility for it, but beyond this consensus usage varies.

In an evaluation of the UNDP's so-called NEX system, *National Execution: Promise and Challenge* (1995), it is proposed that the term ownership be given a meaning resembling that occurring in institutional economics. Ownership there refers to strategic management and control of the kind exercised by the board of directors of a business enterprise or the directorate of a national authority. Ownership, thus interpreted, is contrasted with management, which is more operational leadership.

National ownership, in this sense of the term, is compatible with various forms of project and programme implementation. As long as a country's government and authorities have strategic control of programmes and projects, UN agencies and other external agents can take part in their implementation. The study makes the obvious but nevertheless important point that national ownership is not to be equated with national self-sufficiency. Capacity for strategic management and control is described as the main precondition of ownership. Other factors are important only insofar as they affect this vital capacity.

6.2. National ownership, according to the UNDP study, does not mean the recipient country having unlimited power over the activity supported by the UNDP. NEX is described in the study as a system of *shared ownership* of development programmes. The recipient country should have decisive responsibility for the activity, that is essential, but the UNDP also has a legitimate ownership. The UNDP's ownership limits the recipient country's freedom of action, but according to the study need not stand in the way of the implementation of agreed projects and programmes. Nor is it an obstacle to the recipient country's endeavours to strengthen its capacity for managing processes of development and change.

6.3. The terminology of the UNDP study differs from that of Sida. As the term is used in *Sida at Work*, Sida itself and other external stakeholders are by definition excluded from ownership. Of course, the handbook does not deny that power over development co-operation is to a considerable extent located on the donor side, but it does not permit this power to come under the concept of ownership. The power and influence of external parties have to be described in other terms. The owners of a development intervention are always to be found in the partner country.

By defining the term in this way, Sida calls attention to what everyone regards as the main problem of ownership: the weakness of partner country ownership. Yet, the definition of the UN organisation seems more useful for descriptive and analytical purposes. It allows us to highlight the fact there can be problems of weak “ownership” on the donors’ side as well as on the side of their partners, and it also gives us a word to describe the perhaps more common case where the donor is too dominant. In a study of Swedish development aid to Tanzania commissioned by the Expert Group for Development Issues (EGDI), Catterson and Lindahl (1998) argue that one of the main reasons why in some cases financially unsustainable projects have not been phased out is that they have been supported by influential external stakeholders, notably Sida project managers and Swedish consultants and researchers. Although the point could have been made in different terms, the description in the study of the involvement of these stakeholders as one of excessively strong ownership does not seem inappropriate.

6.4. While external stakeholders are excluded from ownership by the definition given in *Sida at Work*, the term can be applied to a wide range of stakeholders in the partner country. As noted above, there is a principle saying that ownership of projects supported by Sida should be brought as close to the target groups as possible and that the ownership by these groups should be strengthened and respected. As suggested by the fact that the ownership exercised by target groups is described by the special term “popular ownership”, however, beneficiaries are not quite at the centre of Sida’s conceptualisation of ownership. In *Sida at Work* the discussion about ownership is mainly a discussion about the relation between Sida, on the one hand, and Sida’s co-operation partner the so-called project owner, on the other hand.²

Ownership in the Finnish Aid Programme (1996: 9), an evaluation for the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs carried out by a team from the British IDS takes a quite different approach. In that study the beneficiaries are placed in the foreground of the discussion about ownership:

‘Ownership’ refers to the relationships among the stakeholders in a development project. Ownership is high when:

- (i) the intended beneficiaries substantially influence the conception, design, implementation and operations and maintenance of a development project;
- (ii) the implementation agencies that influence the project are rooted in the recipient country and represent the interests of ordinary citizens;
- (iii) there is transparency and mutual accountability among the various stakeholders.

As the term is defined here popular influence and participation are the first and most basic of the tests of partner country ownership. The position of “project owners” and local “implementing agencies” in relation to donors and other external actors is clearly a secondary concern. What really matters is that implementing agencies are rooted in the partner country and represent the interests of ordinary citizens.

The authors of the IDS study argue that many problems of ownership are generated by conflicts of interest between the target groups of development co-operation on the one hand and, on the other, the authorities and other organisations in partner countries tasked with the administration of

² On this point there is greater agreement between *Sida at Work* and the UNDP evaluation referred to above. In the UNDP study it is remarked that, whereas NEX has greatly strengthened the feeling of ownership in the recipient countries – this is said to be the main effect of the system – it has not as a rule led to greater participation by NGOs, grassroots organisations and women. Thus, ownership and popular participation are regarded in the study as two different things, which is not surprising, given that the study defines ownership as a matter of influence at the boardroom level of development co-operation.

projects and programmes. One of the main responsibilities of donor organisations is to ensure that the implementing organisations do not divert the resources transferred from their intended use. As guardians of the interests of beneficiaries they cannot avoid setting limits to the influence of other partner country stakeholders. Still, a project where local implementers benefit at the expense of the intended end users can never be a good project, no matter how greatly it strengthens the implementers in relation to the donors.

The IDS study says that *all* development projects, including those where the ultimate beneficiaries are not involved in project implementation and will not benefit directly or in the short run, must be assessed in a target group perspective:

Virtually all projects these days involve some degree of ‘capacity building’, which is assumed to benefit the institution, with ordinary members of the population gaining only indirectly or in the longer term. Projects aimed at improving the information management systems in the forestry sector are a good example. The critical issue in such situations concerns how the needs and interests of the indirect beneficiaries are taken into account. For example, a forestry information system which is developed with the needs of loggers and paper manufacturers in mind will differ significantly from one which caters explicitly to the situation of farmers and forest-dwellers. This dual role of implementing agencies - of representing the interests of the indirect beneficiaries as well as being stakeholder beneficiaries is often problematic. (p. 31)

To anyone accepting the perspective of the IDS study, the problem of ownership becomes to a considerable extent a *problem of democracy*. Strengthening partner country ownership, according to the study, is much the same thing as strengthening democratic institutions and helping to build a system of development co-operation where affected citizens can supervise local authorities and other implementers and call them to account.

6.5. In current definitions of “ownership” there are both subjective and objective criteria. While the objective criteria refer to formal rights and duties, observable patterns of interaction, effective influence, etc, the subjective ones are the attitudes, feelings, or opinions deemed necessary for ownership to exist. In the IDS definition quoted above all the criteria are objective. Ownership according to this definition is not what project beneficiaries and others stakeholders feel and think, but what they do or fail to do. The common metaphor of ownership as being in ‘the driver’s seat’ also suggests an objective definition, one where ownership is understood as effective command and control. A definition in purely subjective terms, by contrast, occurs in van de Walle’s and Johnston’s *Improving Aid to Africa* (1996:54):³

Recipient governments and beneficiaries can be said to “own” an aid activity when they believe that it empowers them and serves their interests... From a sense of ownership flows a willingness to commit real resources to ensure the activity’s success, to solve problems that emerge during implementation and to sustain the activity after the withdrawal of aid.

For van de Walle and Johnston, then, the criterion of ownership is nothing other than the stakeholders *believing* that the activity in question furthers their interests. From this belief there emanate the practical involvement and assumption of responsibility that, according to everyone, are essential for successful development co-operation. The commonly held view of ownership as meaning

³ Another example of a definition in subjective terms occurs in the report *Partner med Africa* (1997) from the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Here ownership is described as “identification with and feeling of responsibility for an activity” (p. 149).

that the owner regards an activity as “his own” and assumes moral responsibility for it is not discussed, however. Ownership, to van de Walle and Johnston, is the same as self-interest.⁴

In the objectivist perspective, on the other hand, beliefs are *preconditions* for ownership. Real ownership does not exist until relevant convictions and preferences have been translated into action and gained practical recognition – an ownership existing only in the mind or on paper is no real ownership. Weak partner country ownership may be due to the partner country stakeholders not being sufficiently committed to the project, but it can also have other causes. It is easy to imagine a situation where partner country stakeholders have the right commitment but circumstances – institutional arrangements or the behaviour of donors, for example- are such that they cannot effectively express it in action. For ownership to exist there must be opportunity as well as commitment. A problem with subjective definitions is that they are biased towards commitment.

⁴ Ownership in a more subjective sense was previously often discussed under the heading of “commitment”. A useful account of this concept resembling the discussion of ownership by Johnston and van de Walle is given in a frequently quoted study by Arturo Israel (1987):

Lack of commitment occurs when one or more of the main actors – whether an institution or individual – fails to support the agreed goals of a program, the agreed priority attached to meeting the various goals, or the agreed means of achieving them. Commitment may be formal or informal. Typically the main agency responsible for a program formally declares its commitment, but significant individuals remain informally uncommitted.

When there is commitment to a program, there is agreement about the objectives and the methods for achieving them and the main action will form a coalition to support those objectives (p. 132).

“Commitment”, thus defined, consists of *agreement* between the programme actors about the objectives and methods of a programme and the joint *support* given by those same actors to these objectives and methods. One recurrent problem is that some actors are less disposed to give their support than others. Another is that support and agreement tend to vary over time, not least in long-lasting projects where conditions and personnel can change radically with the passing of time. Support from the actors, as a rule, is a fragile state of affairs requiring continuous care and maintenance. Israel writes that it ought to be followed up regularly.

Israel emphasises that the term “commitment” refers to commitment in a deeper sense than purely formal acceptance of the objectives and methods of an activity. The same point is made in the OED’s *Annual Review of Evaluation Results 1992* (1993:105), where “commitment” is explained as follows:

Assessing a recipient’s commitment to TA is not simply a matter of verifying a minister’s acceptance of the need for assistance. Commitment denotes a borrower’s willingness to legislate or amend laws, rules, and procedures: commit staff, resources, equipment, and buildings; abide by agreed conditions and understanding in the Loan Agreement; and take whatever action is deemed necessary for the successful implementation of the project or its TA components. Many agreements reached at the top levels of government are often highly tenuous, and TA is often requested not because it is needed, but because it might pave the way for financial assistance. In such circumstances, the TA may be resented by the national staff, hence changes of its success would be seriously impaired.

Israel’s main recommendations concerning the monitoring of actors’ “commitment” are as follows:

- The analysis should concentrate on leading and influential actors.
- It must not be confined to formal hierarchies.
- It must not be limited to the official interests and motives of actors. The strength of a person’s “commitment” is decided by the extent to which the objectives of the project are in line with all that person’s interests.
- Actors’ declared motives have to be assessed in the light of their actions and actual priorities.

A donor organisation that finds that a project does not have sufficient support among its stakeholders but that still wants to go ahead with the project can, according to Israel, opt for one or more of the following strategies:

- Revision of aims of the project, including the removal of project components for which there is insufficient support.
- Influencing the actors’ attitude to the project by means of a dialogue.
- Alteration of the structure and organisation of the project, including changes of implementing organisation and personnel.
- Financial pressures.

Israel’s observations concerning the “commitment” of actors are clearly relevant to a discussion of ownership. In publications from the World Bank and other organisations, “commitment” and “ownership” are in fact often synonymous. Those attempting to give separate meanings to the terms include Baser and Morgan, who in a study for the World Bank (1996) make ownership represent “direct involvement and accountability for the outcomes of a particular activity” and commitment “general support and backing”. For Moore et al. (1996) the difference between the terms is that “ownership” refers more distinctly than “commitment” to power and control in institutionalised relations.

In *Sida at Work* most of the criteria of ownership are objective, but there is also the criterion of the owner being subjectively committed to the project and ready to assume responsibility for it, etc.

6.6. Readers of an earlier version of this paper have suggested that it is too much concerned with *ownership at the project level*. According to one reader, the concepts of partner country ownership and project support are antithetical, especially today when the proliferation of projects has become a serious development problem in itself. To talk about project ownership is simply confusing, his reader suggests. The best thing that we can do with project support is to get rid of it. As noted above, this is also the view taken in *Sida's Policy for Sector Programme Support*. In *Sida at Work*, on the other hand, the existence of project support is taken for granted. The advice given in this handbook is that different forms of support are appropriate in different types of situations. While sector programme support is specifically recommended as a mode of support congenial with partner country ownership, it is not presented as a remedy to every problem of ownership. Still, the point about levels of ownership is well taken. An analysis of the problems of weak ownership that focuses on individual projects and does not consider aggregation effects and other macro-level phenomena would clearly not be useful.

6.7. Other comments from Sida readers stress the importance of looking at *ownership as a process*, as something that is likely to change over time in response to developments in and around the project. More specifically, it is suggested that we should worry less about ownership at the stage of project planning and implementation than about ownership of the activities that are expected to remain when the project investments have been made and the support from donors phased out. If nobody is able or willing to shoulder the responsibilities of ownership at that stage the preceding efforts will obviously have been in vain. In discussions about ownership, however, we tend to assume that high levels of ownership in the early stages of a project cycle automatically lead to high levels of ownership later on. With changes in the project or its environment, however, an initial support from local stakeholders may easily disappear. As one reader suggests, a high level of ownership at the beginning need not even be a necessary condition for a high levels of ownership at the end. In some cases a turnkey solution would work quite well, he suggests. In any case, partner country ownership of projects is not an end in itself. The important thing is what happens after the termination of external support, he concludes.

7 Effects of ownership

7.1. What, then, is the relation between partner country ownership, on the one hand, and the results of development co-operation, on the other? To what extent is partner country ownership a precondition for good results? This is a series of questions in one. Sida's current evaluation policy mentions five basic criteria for the assessment of projects and programmes: relevance, effectiveness, impact, efficiency and sustainability. The question of a positive connection between partner country ownership and results can be reworded as a series of more specific questions about outcomes in relation to these criteria:

- Does the relevance of projects and programmes in relation to target group needs and partner country policies and priorities vary with ownership?
- Is partner country ownership a precondition for the achievement of objectives in development projects and programmes?
- Do project and programme impacts vary with ownership?

- Is there a systematic relation between the efficiency of projects and programmes and partner country ownership?
- Is the sustainability of projects dependent on partner country ownership?

Clearly, most of these questions must be answered in the affirmative. While not closely related to efficiency, perhaps, ownership is certainly an important determinant of relevance, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. Since a project cannot be considered relevant unless it accords with partner country policies and priorities, and ownership has a lot to do with priorities and policies, a correlation between relevance and ownership is guaranteed by definition. In the case of sustainability there is also a close link. While we can easily think of a project failing after the withdrawal of donor assistance despite strong local ownership, the idea of project benefits being sustained without local ownership is in most cases hardly conceivable. As noted above, however, we need to make a distinction between ownership of the project itself and ownership of the activities that are expected to remain after the project investments have been made. When we say that strong local ownership is a precondition for sustainability we refer primarily to ownership after project completion. The relationship between sustainability and ownership at the implementation stage is also likely to be a close one, although not as close as in the previous case.

With regard to effectiveness and impact, it is again safe to assume that, in general, partner country ownership is a precondition for success—the contrary view that ownership by partner country stakeholders makes no real difference to effectiveness and impact is patently absurd. It is equally evident, however, that partner country ownership cannot be a *sufficient* condition of effectiveness and impact. Other things are also very important. A project based on mistaken technical assumptions, for example, will be a failure no matter how strongly it is supported by local stakeholders.

It is often claimed that partner country ownership is negatively correlated with efficiency and speed of implementation and that this is one of the reasons why donors tend to take over. Yet, it is also commonly argued that in most cases losses in efficiency are well compensated for by gains with regard to impact and sustainability. In other words, while the correlation between ownership and *efficiency* may be negative, the relation between ownership and *cost-effectiveness* is more likely to be positive.

7.2. The most ambitious of the attempts to empirically assess the effects of ownership on results are perhaps those of the World Bank. In a comparative study of the effects of structural adjustment loans to about forty countries, a study frequently quoted in Bank publications, Johnson and Wasty (1993) find a strong positive correlation between partner country ownership and the effects of the programmes funded. The ownership indicators in the study were as follows: (a) the locus of initiative for the programme: borrower-initiated projects are deemed to be owned by the borrowers to a greater extent than programmes initiated by the lender; (b) level of intellectual conviction among key policy-makers in the partner country: programmes where leading policy-makers have great confidence in the programme are considered to be the borrowers' to a greater extent than programmes in which they have less confidence; (c) expression of political will by top leadership: programmes publicly backed up by the partner country's political leadership are borrower-owned to a greater extent than other programmes; and (d) efforts towards consensus-building among various constituencies: programmes on which there is consensus among major interests in the partner country are owned by the partner country to a greater extent than other programmes (ibid. 4–5). What Johnson and Wasty mean when they say that there is a positive correlation between programme results and partner country ownership is that positive programme results tend to go hand in hand with high scores on these indicators.

Baser's and Morgan's (1996) review of the effects of ownership and commitment on the outcome of technical assistance loans (TALs) is another relevant study from the World Bank. Here again a positive correlation between project performance and partner country ownership is reported:

The brief review of the 20 active TALs carried out for this report confirms what is already well-known in the Bank; namely that borrower commitment to the intent, design, and strategy of implementation of the TAL is *the* critical (albeit not the sole) determinant of good performance. Conversely, its absence is a virtual guarantee of ineffectiveness. In the 20 TALs under review, this correlation held to a large degree. Most of the TALs with major elements likely to be sustainable or the TALs where there has been real progress in developing and using national capabilities arose from borrower initiatives. Most of those TALs that were less than satisfactory were supply-driven by the Bank to achieve internal purposes or to meet objectives that the Bank felt to be important... Those projects where the borrower was not persuaded by or committed to a particular policy reform that the Bank was advocating had a particularly poor record of performance. (Baser and Morgan 1996:7-8)

To these studies we should add the OED's annual analyses of project outcomes in relation to the three variables of borrower performance, Bank performance and macroeconomic stability and governance. One recurrent conclusion from the OED analyses is that, of the three variables, borrower performance, which is regarded as a close proxy for borrower ownership, is strongly connected to project performance (OED 1995, 1996, 1997). The OED argues that, although project performance is significantly correlated with all the variables, nothing is as important for project success as a strong and widely established national ownership. The empirical evidence for the OED analyses comes from the Bank's project completion reports and performance audit reports, where the assessment criteria are goal achievement at project level, effects on institutional development and sustainability.

7.3. In the UNDP evaluation of the NEX system, mentioned earlier, strengthened partner country ownership, or more exactly a strengthened *sense of ownership* among partner country stakeholders, is described as the most important of the effects of NEX. Furthermore, the strengthening of the sense of ownership, according to the study, is itself a necessary condition for other intended effects of NEX. It is said to be a precondition for greater self-sufficiency and improved self-reliance as well as for successful capacity building in the partner administration and for sustainability.

The evaluation maintains that the likelihood of local authorities continuing to finance projects after the phasing-out of donor support increases if the authorities concerned have initiated those projects or at least assumed main responsibility for them at an early stage, as has often been the case under NEX. This is the main explanation for the presumed connection between ownership in the recipient country and *sustainability*. The study assumes a high level of national ownership to improve the chances of the project being integrated with the regular system of administration in the partner country. This kind of "de-projectification" of development co-operation is viewed as a prerequisite of sustainability. Activities which are left on their own as isolated enclaves are far more liable to collapse when the donor withdraws than activities that from the outset have been integrated with the regular administrative system.

According to the evaluation, increased partner country ownership tends to lead to a strengthening of the administrative capacity of the partner country. The reason for this is that local programme owners tend to make greater use of local resources for the implementation of UNDP programmes than their external counterparts. The capacity and competence of the local administration and the local consultants are said to grow with the increased demand: strengthening of national ownership triggers processes of "learning by doing". Increased ownership, however, is not to be regarded as a cure for more severe capacity problems stemming from chronic shortage of resources or outmoded forms of administration. The evaluation makes the interesting observation that in some partner

countries NEX programmes have resorted to by-pass solutions of the kind that it is part of the purpose of NEX to abolish. Thus a high level of national ownership is no guarantee of sustainability either.

The study raises the question of whether NEX and heightened sense of ownership in the partner country have made the UNDP's programmes more *cost-effective*. The answer is that the programmes at all events do not seem to have become more expensive. But it is noted that the question of cost-effectiveness is a complex one. A reduction of personnel costs by substituting local for foreign expertise, for example, is no gain in terms of cost-effectiveness unless it can also be shown that the quality of the activity does not deteriorate in the process. Costs due to longer planning times and a slower rate of implementation also have to be factored in.

The study says that increased partner country ownership has a *price* in the form of increased administrative overheads for the recipient country and delayed implementation of programmes and projects. It is also noted that reduced employment of foreign expertise in certain countries can detract from the quality of programmes.

7.4. *Participation* by partner country stakeholders is often said to have the same positive effects on results as partner country ownership. In a *Note on Enhancing Stakeholder Participation in Aid Activities* from DFID (1995) there is the following brief explanation of why, as a rule, a high level of participation by stakeholders in the partner country is preferable to assistance with a lower level of stakeholder participation:

It is more effective because, in drawing on a wide range of interested parties, the prospects for appropriate project design and commitment to achieving objectives is likely to be maximised. (p. 3)

Participation is also said to make assistance more *sustainable*:

It is more sustainable because people are more likely to be committed to carrying on the activity after aid stops, and more able to do so given that participation itself helps develop skills and confidence (p. 3).

In *The World Bank and Participation* (1993:5), the following are said to be benefits of a participatory approach to projects and programmes:

- a check on relevance, especially to the poor, and on the appropriateness of the processes and products of development efforts;
- increased commitment and stakeholder ownership of policies and projects, a willingness to share costs and an interest in sustaining benefits;
- greater efficiency, understanding, and better planning, based on the concern and ideas of a wide range of stakeholders; a better match between human capabilities and physical capital investments;
- greater transparency and accountability and improved institutional performance;
- enhanced information flows which allow markets to function more efficiently;
- increased equity by involving the poor and disadvantaged in development efforts: strengthened capacity of stakeholders, as a consequence of their involvement in the process of development efforts.

Lack of participation has contrary effects:

There is also evidence that not adopting participatory development approaches has many costs. These costs include: a lack of ownership and support which can impede the uptake of services, reduce the sustainability of the intended benefits, and limit the cost-recovery of projects; a sense of indifference and dependency on the state by citizens who see they have little or no say in development; and the harbouring of resentment and wilful obstruction when projects or policies are imposed. In general, non-participatory approaches, which often rely primarily on interventions by outside experts, limit the learning of new possibilities on the part of partner country stakeholders. (p. 6)

8 Causes of weak ownership

8.1. Why is partner country ownership in many cases a good deal weaker than could be desired? Why is it that people in partner countries often do not take sufficiently large and active responsibility for donor-supported projects and programmes?

The answers to these questions and others like them cannot be infinitely variable. Whatever our definition of the term, the strength of ownership depends on two types of circumstance: what the actors *want* and what they, under the prevailing conditions, *can do* or *believe they can do*, their desires, preferences, or *priorities*, on the one hand, and their actual and presumed *capabilities*, on the other. Factors of the one kind, moreover, are not altogether independent of those of the other kind. The actors' priorities are influenced by what they believe themselves able and unable to do, and sometimes influence may also be exerted in the opposite direction.

Where partner country ownership is strong, projects and programmes are consistent with local priorities and compatible with local capabilities and capacity. There is a consensus among local stakeholders about the value and urgency of the activities in question and there is a shared understanding amongst them of what is technically, economically and politically feasible. Where partner country ownership is weak, on the other hand, projects and programmes are out of tune with local priorities or local capacity or both. An investigation of the determinants of ownership is to a great extent an investigation of factors respectively promoting and undermining the necessary fit between priorities and capabilities, on the one hand, and development projects and programmes, on the other.

8.2. Weak partner country ownership seems to be the norm rather than the exception in development co-operation, although there are variations between countries. Not surprisingly, it is in the countries that are most in need of external assistance, that the problems of weak ownership tend to be greatest. In these countries the scale of social and economic problems is out of all proportion to local resources and capacities. Paradoxically, the gap between the existing problems and the determination of government to do something about them can also be greater than elsewhere. In many poor countries, pervasive inequalities and lack of popular power and participation create a situation where national leaders and ruling elites lack strong incentives for seriously tackling existing problems. In many cases weak systems of governance make large-scale graft and corruption possible. Recurrent setbacks in development work can also create feelings of inability and resignation. Under such conditions, the risk of donor organisations and other external benefactors "taking over" the development agenda and intervening in the planning and implementation of development programmes is so great that one has difficulty in seeing how it could be altogether avoided.

8.3. At the same time, the problems of weak partner country ownership are seriously aggravated by ill-conceived donor practices. As stressed in the guidelines to *Sida's Policy for Sector Programme Support*,

the great proliferation of donors and donor-supported projects is one of the main causes of weak ownership in poor, aid-receiving countries. The obvious solutions to this problem are more programme support and less project support, more and better donor co-ordination – through sector programme support and by other means – and increased support to capacity development in the administrative systems in the partner countries. As it is a precondition for the recommended shift from project support to programme support, closer donor co-ordination is perhaps the most important of the proposed solutions. Yet, the difficulties of making donors collaborate are well known. One of the standard explanations for lack of donor co-operation is that development assistance is a political instrument that donor countries use to further their own national interests, even at the expense of aid effectiveness. Another common explanation, not inconsistent with the first, is that the partner countries themselves, or their leaders, prefer the existing state of fragmented support to a more close-knit system where donors might be “ganging up” and partner countries would have less power to bargain and resist donor pressure.

3.4. The recommended support for capacity building is also fraught with difficulties, partly for same reasons. In a much-quoted study for the UNDP, Berg (1993:137) maintains that existing support for capacity building has an excessively technical and bureaucratic slant. Although the donors are well aware of the fact that administrative weaknesses frequently have institutional and political causes, problems of this order are usually not addressed when donors meet partner country representatives:

...progress in transferring responsibility to the recipient may have been hindered by too narrow perceptions about the sources of administrative deficiencies in recipient countries. Many observers, including some donor representatives, stress underlying factors such as lack of political will (as expressed in inadequate and inefficient budget allocations and acceptance of corruption); institutional weaknesses such as nepotism and inability to fire people for poor performance; poor use of existing staff (little delegation of responsibility and few staff meetings); and poorly developed procedures in critical areas such as project preparation and evaluation, financial monitoring, policy analysis, and debt management.

Few donor agencies would deny the existence of such problems. Still, in the dialogue between donors and their host country counterparts poor performance is attributed mainly to insufficient or unqualified staff and to insufficient equipment or lack of operating funds. Management problems are defined as human resource problems and financial problems rather than as institutional problems.

A problem with support to capacity building as a means of strengthening partner ownership is that it requires partner country ownership in order to succeed. Capacity development initiatives, like other development co-operation programmes, have to be assessed against criteria of commitment and capacity. Without a favourable configuration of institutions and support from a wide range of local stakeholders they are likely to fail. CIDA consultant Peter Morgan (1997:8) forcefully makes this point:

...we need to acknowledge once again what should be obvious – that the one constant factor in successful examples of capacity development is the degree of energy, commitment and ownership associated with the project at field level. But we need broader ways to think about commitment and ownership issues. Commitment in principle to policy and organizational changes has to be supplemented by commitment to resolving the more onerous constraints that come during implementation. Commitment and ownership also have a political aspect in the sense that there must be a sufficiently powerful coalition of forces behind capacity development to enable such a reform to succeed. Commitment and ownership thus goes beyond the personal preferences of the direct participants and relates to the general patterns of incentives, interests, anxieties, understandings and perception of risk in the wider environment. Whatever techniques and tools are devised in the donor community to design indicators, they must have participant ownership and commitment at their core if they are to be of much use.

8.5. The *conditionality* of aid is commonly mentioned as another main source of weak partner country ownership. Indeed, the current debates over ownership in development co-operation are to a large extent a response to the failure or presumed failure of aid conditionality, especially in the context of structural adjustment.

The incompatibility between conditionality and ownership is obvious. The need for conditions arises only where donors want to induce partner countries to adopt policies or programmes that they would not adopt of their own accord. Situations may exist where external pressure can help a partner country government to implement policies or programmes that it believes to be correct but is afraid to adopt for internal political reasons. One can also imagine situations where conditions imposed by donors serve to overcome an initial resistance that fades away when the adopted policies or programmes begin to pay off. Yet even in such cases conditionality and ownership are mutually inconsistent. Full ownership exists only where all major partner country stakeholders accept the proposed policies or programmes on their own merit. Where such acceptance exists there is no need for conditions.

8.6. There are those who doubt that the donor countries' intentions to promote partner country ownership are fully compatible with their aims and requirements concerning poverty reduction, human rights, democratisation, gender equality, the natural environment, privatisation, economic reforms and so on.

In *Sida at Work*, as in other Sida documents, it is emphasised that co-operation must be looked for in areas where Sweden and the partner country agree on fundamental values – as noted above a basic consensus on values is the central ingredient of the idea of partnership as Sweden understands it. Where such consensus does not exist, there should not be any co-operation between the governments. Swedish support, if any, should instead be channelled through civil society organisations.

What does this mean in practice? To what extent is a proactive stance regarding poverty reduction, gender equality or democracy practically compatible with a stress on partner country ownership? As pointed out in *Partner with Africa* (1997:151), a report from the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, there may be a risk of the donor “buying” the acceptance by local actors of objectives which they do not embrace as their own and to which they do not give priority. The donor may be unaware of what really happens in the transactions with his counterpart and may imagine that there is a stronger consensus on values and a stronger commitment to common objectives than is actually the case. The donor may also act contrary to his own better knowledge, in the hope that the partner's commitment will grow with the passing of time. One considerable problem is that the donors, quite contrary to their own policy, often take over the partner country's task of identifying and preparing projects and programmes. As a result, at a later stage when they come to assess project proposals, they may be incapable of distinguishing between their own convictions and preferences and those of the recipient.

8.7. More generally, it can be argued that the reason why, in many cases, partner country governments and other organisations in partner countries do not act as full owners of externally supported projects and programmes is that their powers over them do not in fact amount to real ownership. Even when there are no special conditions concerning policy reform attached to the resources provided by donors, there are other restrictions. Donor support is granted for limited periods of time – two or three years is the normal period for an agreement with Sida – and further support is conditional on performance in relation to agreed project objectives. In many cases there is an understanding between the parties that the support will continue over several agreement periods. Also, donor requirements regarding project performance may not be very demanding. Still, the fact

that the support cannot be taken for granted but has to be renegotiated over and over again is likely to have an impact on partner country ownership, symbolically as well as practically. On the practical side it creates uncertainty and makes long-term planning more difficult than otherwise. Symbolically, it serves as a strong reminder to the 'project owners' that they are dependent on the good will of the donor and that they have no formal rights to assistance. According to the argument, this is bound to seriously weaken partner country ownership of the projects and programmes in question.

8.8. We must also consider the *demoralising and dependency-creating effects* of resourceful and energetic donors giving the orders in partner countries. SIDA's Bo Westman (1988:5) made reference, in general terms, to these problems in connection with *Rollutredningen (The Role Inquiry)*:

Many developing countries have become unhealthily dependent on assistance. Above all, of course, this means economic dependency on the donor in order to manage their development budget, and in order to pay off their debts (to the same donor). But a harmful dependence on the donors has also developed with regard to the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects. The donors have been excessively eager to do the job themselves and often this has suited the recipients.

Domination by the donors can easily create a feeling of inability and inferiority in the partner country, which in turn can become a serious impediment to national ownership. The more decision-making and project management are taken over by the donors, the fewer opportunities the partner country owners will have of acquiring the skills and the self-esteem that they may need in order to exercise their ownership effectively. The result could also be an exaggerated preoccupation with questions of development assistance, to the detriment of other vital social problems.

In the UNDP study quoted earlier representatives of partner countries are quoted as referring to the psychological benefits of increased partner country ownership and assumption of responsibility through the NEX system:

In African countries, all government officials spoke with great pride and conviction, about how they were finally able to control their own UNDP-assisted projects rather than wait and see what was decided and designed in Rome or Geneva. In Malawi, for instance, authorities see the benefits of ownership as the responsibility to make projects succeed, and the freedom to make their own mistakes and to learn from their own mistakes, thereby generating a sense of pride.

8.9. Comments to a draft of this paper suggest that the point above should be modified. While not denying that there is a tendency of donors "taking over" and that this has all kinds of unfortunate consequences, readers say that this is not the whole story. 'Project owners' and other partner country stakeholders should not be regarded as passive victims of aid, they argue, but as agents actively seeking to further their interests. While there may be situations where dominant donors deprive partner country owners of their ownership, there are also situations where it would be more correct to say that the project owners have decided that it is not in their best interest to shoulder the responsibilities of ownership. This is how one Sida reader puts it:

We should not forget the other side of the coin, that is, how our co-operation partners perceive the situation. When I was posted in East Africa, I was often impressed by the skill with which our partners played the game of development co-operation. For various reasons it suited them well that we took a great deal of responsibility – our resources were usually greater than theirs were. Of course, this is an unhealthy kind of dependency relationship. Since it has supporters on both sides, however, I think it will continue for a long time. In order to strengthen partner country ownership we need a deeper understanding of this play of interests. It should also be remembered that the use of aid is influenced by short-term political decisions in the partner country. For partner country politicians it is often easier to just accept what is offered at the moment than to be more selective and only accept offers that on closer examination seems useful in a perspective of long-term sustainability.

8.10. A commonly recommended solution to ownership problems caused by external dominance is that the donors should avoid financing too large a part of partner country projects and programmes. To ensure that attitudes and incentives are not distorted on either side of the relationship, the *partner country owners should be required to invest substantially in donor-supported projects*. A recommendation of the same kind is that there should be well-defined *time limits* for donor assistance. Plans for the phasing out of donor support should be made right from the beginning. The underlying theory is that *ownership is strengthened by sacrifice*. Things that seem to be available in unlimited supply without cost are not likely to create a strong sense of responsibility and ownership. By setting limits to their support the donors will help their partners to sort out their priorities. Unlimited generosity is no generosity, or so it is said.

8.11. These and other measures to limit the involvement of donors are easily undermined by conflicting concerns. Thus, it is widely believed that efforts to strengthen partner country ownership are seriously weakened by *pressures for rapid disbursement of aid funds*. As a result of such pressures donors may decide to lend support to projects and programmes that do not look promising from the point of view of partner country ownership. They may also find it more difficult to withdraw from projects that seem to be losing their initial backing from partner country stakeholders or they may be tempted to help speed up the implementation of projects when this is not really consistent with their policies regarding ownership.

In the Swedish debate there are those who claim that the pressures for rapid disbursement in fact are the most important of all the impediments to increased partner country ownership. Were it not for the so-called *disbursement goal*, it is said, we would be able to act in accordance with what we believe to be effective ways of promoting partner country ownership. At present, however, this is not possible. If a choice must be made between disbursement and ownership, priority is given to disbursement. No one yet seems to have found the answer to the question of how both the objectives can be pursued at one and the same time. Increased support for the partner countries' capacity for planning and preparing projects is sometime proposed as a solution. In the above-quoted study for EGDI by Catterson and Lindahl (1998:101-2) it is suggested that the problem would be solved by the introduction of a more demand-driven and results-oriented allocation system based on development funds.

8.12. Demands in the donor countries for *control* to ensure that development assistance funds are put to good use and yield results in agreement with donor objectives is also said to be a major impediment to partner country ownership. Donors' *lack of trust* in the intentions or abilities of their partners is said to undermine their aim of strengthening partner country ownership. In an evaluation of Dutch development assistance to Tanzania, it is noted that over the years the Dutch support has become increasingly donor-controlled. The cause of this development is said to be demands from Dutch politicians and the Dutch public that the development co-operation programme should deliver 'value for money' (Netherlands Development Co-operation 1994, 1995). The evaluation observes the somewhat ironic fact that the change towards greater donor involvement in the implementation of projects and programmes and more rigorous controls has coincided with a gradually increased emphasis on partner country ownership at the policy level of Dutch development assistance:

Although Netherlands development co-operation policy aims at a larger role for the recipient country, this has been hard to realise owing to the weakness of Tanzania's administrative capacity. A higher degree of delegation to the recipient is also hampered by more detailed donor regulations to enhance the program's quality and accountability. This shift to a more control-oriented approach is a response to growing concerns in the donor community about aid performance. There are strong political demands to achieve 'value for money' and to account for the use of aid funds. At the implementation level there is a tendency among donors to assume more responsibility to see aid

programmes executed quickly and correctly. Less than half of all aid funds were implemented under direct responsibility of the Tanzanian government in the early 1990's. In the beginning of the 1980's this was still three-quarters. There is a desire to reduce even further the influence of the recipient country in the implementation of the aid programme. This approach, however, also entails risks. The trend towards a more donor-controlled approach can erode the sense of recipient ownership and commitment. Furthermore compliance with bureaucratic donor procedures or levels of disbursement may become the most important yardsticks. This offers no real guarantee that aid funds have been well spent for development purposes. Through such an approach the problem of weak administrative capacity is circumvented rather than tackled up front. (1995:109)

8.13. It is interesting to compare this analysis of Dutch assistance to Tanzania with the study by Catterson and Lindahl (1998) of Swedish support to dozen large development projects in the same country. Here again a situation is described where interests in the donor country collide with the donor country's clearly stated aim of promoting partner country ownership. A notable difference, however, is that, whereas in the Dutch case the concern with ownership comes into conflict with demands from politicians and the public, the Swedish study finds impediments to ownership within Sida itself and among the Swedish consulting firms and research institutions involved in the implementation of the reviewed projects.

According to the Swedish study, Sida and its Swedish associates have tended to keep projects going even though the prospects of sustainability and national ownership have been poor. In the case of Sida itself this can be explained by an *excessively strong commitment to "its own" projects and a concomitant lack of detachment*. Instead of resolutely phasing out projects without a sustainable future, programme officers and others have refused for as long as possible to abandon hope of "their" projects. In the case of consultants and researchers, direct *self-interest* has presumably also been a very important reason for not abandoning hope.

In several of the reviewed projects Sida and other Swedish actors played a dominant role during the phase of project preparation, which of course is contrary to everything that can be considered established knowledge concerning the preconditions of partner country ownership. Systems for monitoring and evaluation had in many cases not been well developed, which also suggests that a concern with partner country ownership was not a top priority. The study mentions one large project that had been kept going for more than twenty years without it ever having been evaluated.⁵

⁵ Demands for closer control and improved result accounting have also been presented in Sweden, however. Control problems were observed by SIDA in connection with the *Role Inquiry*. One question discussed concerned the way in which the control demands could be combined with a strengthening of partner -country ownership. One of the conclusions reached was that SIDA should endeavour to ensure that policy-makers and the general public in Sweden acquired a better understanding of the problems of ownership and of the preconditions of development assistance:

The measures proposed above can mean an increased assumption of risk in development assistance. The shift of roles can lead to delays, additional expenditure etc. Short-term effectiveness sometimes has to be sacrificed in order for the long-term positive effects to be achieved. Increased demands will be made for realistic goal formulations, timetables, budgets, disbursement forecasts etc. in a situation where SIDA's steering function is to be reduced and uncertainty may possibly increase. But SIDA of course retains its administrative accountability for development assistance funding to the Government, Riksdag and public opinion. Development assistance funding must be used effectively for the agreed purposes. It is this very concept of effectiveness that has to be viewed in a long-term perspective and related to the possible role of development assistance in a developing country. The measurement of effectiveness should be adapted to conditions in the recipient county. This may call for discussions with the National Audit Office, the Ministry of Finance and others. SIDA will acquire an important opinion-creating and informative role with a view to making this intelligible and accepted among policy-makers and the general public in Sweden. (Rollutredningen, SIDA 1989, p. 11)

It is not known whether these recommendations resulted in any concrete measures being taken by SIDA.

8.14. Still another problem, perhaps, is that donors lack *knowledge and methods for coping practically with the problems of ownership*. Baser's and Morgan's description of the problems of the World Bank might be more widely applicable:

...once the obvious acknowledgement is made of the importance of borrower commitment, the Bank (and most other development agencies) finds it an awkward principle to integrate into their operations. Commitment and ownership are discussed as desirable but somewhat exogenous preconditions to effectiveness rather than as outcomes or even the objective itself of a particular TAL. Participation is sometimes implicitly seen as a way to induce local decision makers to buy into the technical design of a Bank TAL. Operational staff at the Bank still do not use any systematic way of assessing borrower commitment during TAL design. There is a sense that the notions of commitment and ownership remain abstractions that are either too subjective or too political to analyse with any rigor. There is little discussion of the subtle ways in which large and powerful institutions such as the Bank act to erode the very commitment they need to make their projects effective. (Baser and Morgan, 1996:8)

Work for the strengthening of partner ownership calls, according to Baser and Morgan, for considerable changes in attitudes, opinions and working procedures:

Most donors find it difficult to face the implication of responding fully to the need to make commitment and ownership issues a central concern. In the final analysis, it means modifying and even abandoning patterns of organisational behaviour that have been embedded for many years and which have been traditional strengths. It is not, for example, immediately apparent to some Bank staff how technical excellence can be easily combined with borrower ownership. It is not clear how sufficient Bank control and accountability over projects can still be exercised. There are real possibilities that rates of commitment could drop even in the medium and longer terms. But unless borrower commitment and ownership becomes the driving forces behind Bank TALs, there is no chance of them achieving any noticeable or sustainable boost in performance. (Baser and Morgan, 1996:10)

9 Evaluation issues

9.1. The evaluation planned by UTV is intended as a study of how development co-operation through Sida accords with Swedish and Sida policies with regard to ownership. As Swedish policies concerning ownership conform closely to the current OECD/DAC policy recommendations set down in the attached *Strengthening Development Partnership. A Working Checklist* (1998) and elsewhere, it can also serve as a review of development co-operation through Sida in relation to the existing international consensus among donors on the subject. Its point of departure is the time-honoured Swedish view that the partner countries have the main responsibility for their own development and that Sida's task is to assist in the creation of preconditions for development, not itself to bring about change. The study is to investigate what this has come to mean in practice.

9.2. The planned evaluation will attempt to answer the question of whether Sida's methods of supporting ownership by partner countries are appropriate and effective. It will not deal with the more basic issue of whether there is in fact a positive causal connection between ownership and development results. For the purpose of this study, the existence of such a connection will be taken as sufficiently proved. The nature and relative importance of the connection will be discussed only in so far as it is necessary for answering the question regarding the adequacy of Sida's methods of promoting partner country ownership. The purpose of the evaluation is the formative one of supporting ongoing efforts in Sida to improve practice. It will cover the failures and disappoint-

ments of 'worst practice' as well as the achievements of 'best practice'. It will look for the causes of identified shortcomings and suggest remedies.

9.3. As shown by the review above, the term ownership can be used with a variety of meanings. Still, the diversity of meaning should not be exaggerated. The term is everywhere taken to refer to a state of affairs where a developing country or an organisation in a developing country effectively takes responsibility for its own needs and interests and does not unduly depend on external support for the formulation and implementation of its development agenda. This is the meaning of the term that is captured by the metaphor of ownership as being in the driver's seat. While sharing this understanding of the term, however, we may disagree about the causes of ownership problems. Some believe that weak partner country ownership is generally to be explained by lack of commitment among partner country stakeholders, others argue that it should rather be accounted for by lack of capacity or lack of opportunity, etc. Such differences of opinion or perspective are natural, since the topic is both analytically complex and politically sensitive. Difficulties may arise, however, if views about the causes of the problem are built into the definition of the concept, as when ownership is equated with commitment or identification. For the purpose of the study planned questions about causes are left open to investigation.

9.4. In *Sida at Work* the discussion about ownership is mainly concerned with the relations between Sida and Sida's co-operation partner, the so-called project owner. As described above, however, there is also a broader concept of ownership in the handbook. According to this concept every partner country stakeholder is or should be regarded as an owner. In many cases there is a hierarchy of owners with the partner country government at the one end and the intended end users of the project benefits at the other. In the study planned the term will be used in this inclusive sense. As suggested by the IDS study referred to above, many problems of ownership are likely to stem from the fact that the interests of one group of partner country stakeholders are incompatible with those of another.

9.5. On the basis of the discussion in this paper, the following would seem to be important issues for the intended evaluation to consider:

- *Ownership in country strategy processes.* To what extent and in what ways is ownership an issue in Sida's country strategy processes? To what extent are country strategy documents based on assessments of ownership? What is the quality of such assessment and what is their impact? How is ownership balanced against other considerations? How does Sida make sure that country programmes are compatible with partner country priorities and capacities? Is Sida sufficiently informed about those aspects of partner organisations that are relevant to issues of ownership? How are partner country stakeholders consulted in the process?
- *From project approaches to programme approaches.* To what extent has Sida learned to look beyond individual projects to development issues at the levels of countries, regions, and sectors, and what has Sida done to shift its investments from projects to larger programmes? What are Sida's experience with SWAPs and other forms of programme support? Do results in this area conform to expectations? What are the obstacles and lessons learned?
- *Ownership as a consideration in project identification and selection.* What is Sida's involvement in project identification and preparation? To what extent are projects independently initiated and planned by partner country actors? To what extent is ownership a consideration in project selection? How are assessments of ownership made in the selection process? What are the indicators for ownership? To what extent is ownership at the stage of project completion an issue at the stage of

project appraisal? How often are project proposals turned down for ownership reasons? Are projects correctly assessed? How should departures from accepted principles for the identification and selection of projects be explained? What are the possible remedies?

- *Ownership in project implementation and follow-up.* What are the recurrent problems of ownership at these stages of the project cycle? What is done by Sida to nurture partner ownership of ongoing projects? What is done to encourage ownership of the processes of follow-up and evaluation? In what ways and with what effects does Sida set limits to its own involvement in project implementation and follow-up (financial responsibility, time limits, etc.)? How do ownership considerations affect decisions concerning procurement? How important is ownership in relation to competing concerns (disbursement pressures, control, etc.)?
- *Reforming project support.* How does Sida deal with the well-known problems of free-standing projects, separate project implementation units, etc? What is done by Sida to assist its co-operation partners to integrate Sida-supported projects with their regular systems of administration? What is done by Sida to simplify procedures for reporting, procurement and disbursement? What are Sida's experiences of working with forms of project support that are supposed to be more demand-driven and more conducive to partner country ownership than others (contract financing of technical co-operation, twinning, etc.)?
- *Projects in support of partner country ownership.* To what extent is partner country ownership a primary objective in Sida-supported projects? Are there projects designed specifically for the purpose of strengthening partner country ownership of development co-operation processes? What is done by Sida to strengthen the ability of partner countries to define development agendas, to set priorities and formulate policies? What is done to remove existing administrative impediments to ownership? What about projects intended to strengthen the capacity of partner countries to control and co-ordinate donor inputs to development processes? To what extent have such projects produced expected results?
- *Enhancing "popular ownership"* How does Sida interpret the principle in *Sida at Work* that the ownership of target groups should be respected and strengthened? Are Sida's efforts to strengthen popular ownership generally effective? What is known about the results of such efforts? Do efforts to strengthen the ownership of target groups and other affected groups of citizens come into conflict with efforts to strengthen the ownership of Sida's co-operation partners and vice versa? Are Sida's co-operation partners generally receptive to Sida's ambitions regarding popular ownership? Is popular ownership as important to them as it is to Sida?
- *Co-operation and co-ordination with other donors.* To what extent does Sida co-operate directly with other donors for the purpose of promoting partner country ownership? To what extent are the activities of other donors taken into account when Sida-supported projects and programmes are prepared? To what extent does Sida support efforts to strengthen the capacity of partner countries to co-ordinate and direct donor projects? What are the results and lessons learned of such activities?
- *Advocacy for ownership.* To what extent and in what ways does Sida use its platform in international fora to further the cause of partner country ownership?

As suggested by this inventory of issues, an evaluation on the theme of ownership will be a study of how Sida deals with of *conflicting objectives*. To what extent is Sida's concern for partner country ownership compatible with other major objectives? What happens to ownership when other urgent matters come into the picture? What is done to prevent considerations of ownership being thrust aside or forgotten?

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Strengthening Development Partnerships

A Working Checklist

As part of the continuing work of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) aimed at effective implementation of the Development Partnerships Strategy, a Forum of Development Partners was convened on 19 January 1998 in conjunction with the Committee's Senior Level Meeting. The Forum presentations — focused on five partner countries, together with much other experience by DAC members — led the Senior level participants to the following points as a working checklist to guide efforts toward improving partnerships, and simplifying and harmonising donor procedures.

1. Donors should encourage recipient partners to formulate their own development strategies - setting out the local priorities, plans and instruments for implementing such strategies. This process should systematically involve civil society, as well as consultation with external partners. Where such locally-owned strategies are compatible with internationally agreed goals, donors should work to implement their aid programmes in a co-ordinated manner on the basis of such locally owned strategies and accept their discipline.
2. Donors should stimulate and help strengthen recipient partner-led co-ordination of development co-operation. The capacity for local co-ordination (which can and should also strengthen the international process) may be improved by donors' own delegation of decision-making authority from headquarters to field missions. At the international level, the possible advantages and disadvantages of organising Consultative Group (and Round Table) meetings in the capitals of the recipient partners concerned, should be further tested in practice.
3. Transparency of donor and recipient partner interests and mutual trust should be increased through continuous dialogue, both informal and through systematic work on themes and sectors through standing sub-groups, preferably led by the host government.
4. External partners should agree in principle to adjust more to local procedures, where necessary helping recipient countries to bring their procedures and management capacities up to international standards. There may be useful DAC roles in identifying best practices and helping organise pilot exercises to move toward the simplification and harmonisation of procedures.

5. Practices involving tied aid are prominently identified among procedures that can impair local ownership and capacity-building, with substantial economic and credibility costs. The proposal for a DAC Recommendation to start with untying aid to Least Developed Countries could be a step toward improved partnerships in this area, yielding additional tangible benefits for partners from competitive bidding and from local procurement.
6. Donors share the objective of ending the proliferation of projects and providing their aid increasingly in forms of programme and budget assistance to support the country's strategic priorities for development. To this end, they need to help strengthen partner countries' capacities to manage such aid, and further test the various approaches and conditions under which they can pool their contributions in country funds for major sectors or key goals e.g., poverty eradication. The integration of aid spending into the overall budget context may require donors to manage their own significant inputs differently to help strengthen local revenue pools.
7. There is a widely felt need to support local capacity building by changing the existing modalities for providing technical co-operation, which often appears expensive and excessive, hampering true ownership and the use and development of local capacities.
8. The practices of joint monitoring and evaluation of development programmes by donor and recipient partners should be further developed and applied, with a view to learning together the lessons of achievements and failures.
9. Improving the coherence between external partners' development co-operation policies and their other policies (such as those affecting trade and investment) affecting recipient partners is clearly seen as increasingly important to help the developing countries concerned move toward reduced dependence on aid.
10. Innovative ways of financing should be constructed so as to have ODA play catalytic and leverage roles in generating and attracting other forms of domestic and foreign investment; the roles of grants, loans, forms of support for the local private sector, and "matching" contributions by beneficiaries merit further careful assessment and coherent policies.
11. External partners should continue to help lessen the debt burden of recipient partners; in this context, among others, the modality of various types of "debt swaps" should be considered.

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