

Where There's a Will, There's a Way? Untangling Ownership and Political Will in Post-Conflict Stability and Reconstruction Operations

by Derick W. Brinkerhoff

How best to assist fragile and post-conflict states to improve conditions for their citizens and to establish the policies, institutions, and governance procedures that will lead to socio-economic development has constituted an enduring set of questions for international assistance agencies. These questions have taken on renewed urgency in today's world where concerns about transnational terrorism, intrastate conflict, and state failure have led to an intersection among the policy, research, and programmatic agendas of the international development, humanitarian, security, and diplomatic communities. The World Bank's list of fragile states grew from seventeen to twenty-six during the years 2003 to 2006, confirming that the problem of addressing the needs of low-income countries affected by poor governance, persistent poverty, and weak economic growth is becoming ever more difficult and complex.¹

While definitions of fragile states vary, all concur that state fragility is directly related to capacity deficits. Fragile states have governments that are incapable of assuring basic security for their citizens, fail to provide basic services and economic opportunities, and are unable to garner sufficient legitimacy to maintain citizens' confidence and trust. When these capacity deficits are large enough, states move toward failure, collapse, crisis, and conflict. In post-conflict countries, the recovery process—often supported by international donor assistance—involves rebuilding capacity and filling deficits, though backsliding is an ever-present risk. As Collier et al. note, countries that have experienced violent conflict face a 40 percent risk of renewed violence within five years.²

Post-conflict capacity building, however, does not take place solely as a function of outside intervention and assistance. Capacity development is fundamentally an endogenous process that engages not just the abilities and skills, but the motivation, support, and aspirations of people within a country.³ The labels assigned to the latter

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are ownership and/or political will. Today's consensus states that successful development and post-conflict reconstruction assistance is country-led and country-owned.⁴ Yet, particularly for the international community, it is problematic to accurately identify ownership and political will, and to differentiate these two volitional components from capacity questions. This brief essay addresses this problem and explores several issues that need to be considered in order for members of the international community to determine to what extent their country partners embrace new policies and programs as "theirs," and to distinguish between when their country partners *can* or *cannot* take certain actions from when they *will* or *will not*.

A fundamental question concerns what we mean by these terms. The essence of ownership and political will has to do with people. It might seem obvious to note that ownership and will involve actors. Yet, part of the conceptual and analytical difficulties with the terminology associated with these concepts is the tendency to aggregate political will to higher levels, e.g., national ownership and country commitment. This aggregation provides a handy way to ascertain whether government officials appear to be doing what donors want them to do; however, it suffers from (a) reifying whole countries and governments into unitary actors, and (b) leaving vague and unspecified exactly who is willing to do what. Ownership and will involve the commitment of actors to pursue particular objectives, undertake actions in support of those objectives, and sustain them and the costs they may incur over time. Killick emphasizes these features in his definition of ownership:

*Government ownership is at its strongest when the political leadership and its advisers, with broad support among agencies of state and civil society, decide of their own volition that policy changes are desirable, choose what these changes should be and when they should be introduced, and where these changes become built into the parameters of policy and administration, which are generally accepted as desirable.*⁵

Ownership and will are intimately connected to whose objectives are being pursued, who values their attainment, and whose resources are expended to reach them. This connection brings to the fore the interactions between members of the international community offering assistance and country decision makers.

ISSUE 1: DONOR-COUNTRY RELATIONS

In the context of international assistance, the nature of the donor–country relationship is an important factor in generating ownership for policy changes. This relationship, and the degree of ownership that it creates, are key contributors to aid effectiveness, as a vast literature attests.⁶

For example, the problems associated with donor-imposed objectives are well documented in the experiences of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund with structural adjustment. The literature on this topic is replete with examples of reforms that senior government officials agreed to as the price of getting assistance, although they had little or no intention of following through on the conditionalities in those loan packages.⁷ These officials were nominally in agreement with the reform objectives, but clearly did not own the reforms.

These analyses and reflections have led, on the international agency side, to calls for—and in some cases, actions to promote—donor harmonization and alignment with country policies and practices; on the country side, it has led to promoting country-led and/or community-driven development.⁸ The aid effectiveness working group of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) puts ownership at the top of its results pyramid, supported by harmonization and alignment.⁹

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In post-conflict settings, the donor–country relationship can be particularly problematic. On the side of external actors, their differing objectives, interests, and roles clearly have an impact. For example, the military focuses on conflict containment, security, and peacekeeping, while the bilateral development agencies combine political, relief, and development objectives. International NGOs often have a mix of objectives—relief, human rights, justice, and development, and the multilateral lenders focus mainly on financing reconstruction and a return to economically productive activity. In any given post-conflict situation, whose objectives prevail or which combination of goals is pursued, how the various actors are aligned and/or how they compete, and what level of resources and power they bring are critical to shaping the reconstruction package that external actors encourage domestic actors to own and exercise political will to implement.¹⁰

Societal actors also have their own objectives, interests, and roles within particular fragile/post-conflict states. A key feature of many conflict/post-conflict situations is that not all country actors are equally interested in the cessation of conflict and violence. These so-called “conflict entrepreneurs” and “spoilers” have a strong interest in prolonging crisis and instability, for a mix of economic and political reasons. The negotiations to end conflict and reestablish security create incentives that influence subsequent reconstruction efforts. Country actors strike deals precisely to gain an upper hand with regard to the anticipated international support that follows conflict, hoping for legitimated authority in the process and a role in future governance. These deals may exclude or disfavor other groups whose commitment, capacity, and resources will be needed for reconstruction.¹¹

As a result, ownership and political will for activities such as demobilization and disarmament, reconciliation and restorative justice, democratic governance, decentralization, and economic reconstruction will vary across actors. Lister and Wilder, for instance, note the gap in commitment to reforms between central- and local-level actors in Afghanistan.¹² Agreements made by national authorities with international donors do not necessarily engage the political will of sub-national actors.

ISSUE 2: MEASUREMENT

Measuring ownership and political will faces three interrelated challenges: (a) “observability,” (b) distinguishing between will and capacity, and (c) subjectivity and bias in perceptions of ownership. “Observability” problems arise because ownership and will cannot be directly observed and must be inferred from other factors; these problems are shared by the concept of capacity. These measurement difficulties lead, in both cases (ownership/will and capacity), to *post hoc* assessments that attribute disappointing outcomes from the donor’s point of view, due to their insufficiency. A related issue is the problem of measuring ownership/will separately from capacity.

Anderson et al., for example, propose sets of indicators that differentiate between capacity and what they call willingness for poverty reduction.¹³ For both capacity and willingness, in recognition of the impossibility of direct observation, they employ a set of outcome indicators related to pro-poor public expenditure, immunization rates, and so on.

Post-conflict situations often exhibit sociopolitical dynamics that result in weak ownership and will, along with limited capacity. Variations in both will and capacity exist at multiple levels in a country, as the Afghanistan example just mentioned illustrates. These variations can be manifested across countries as well, and these two concepts have been used to develop what has come to be a frequently-cited typology of states:¹⁴

- Strong capacity, strong political will: good performers
- Limited capacity, strong political will: weak but willing states
- Strong capacity, weak political will: strong but unresponsive states
- Weak capacity, weak political will: states at risk or failed states.

Further complicating the entanglement of ownership, political will, and capacity is that, depending upon the reforms agreed to by domestic actors, they may need capacities that are new or in short supply to follow through on their commitments. Collins and Higgins note that ownership calls for an additional set of capacities beyond those needed for discrete donor-funded project implementation.¹⁵ Governments need the capacity to interact with citizens to identify needs, set priorities, and design programs to address those needs. These activities put a premium on budgeting and planning skills, as well as on coordination and decision-making—heavy demands on weak governments in post-conflict situations. Morrissey and Verschoor point out that domestic decision makers’ assessments of their capacity to implement reforms will influence their *a priori* willingness to make commitments.¹⁶ Thus, what outsiders may deem to be a lack of ownership or political will could in fact relate more to the insufficient capacity of the state.

Another measurement issue that flows from unpacking ownership in terms of the array of actors involved is its relative nature. Ownership is not usefully conceived of as a binary variable (yes, it is there, or no, it is not). Rather, ownership and political will lend themselves to assessments of a relative degree of presence/absence, either for specific actors, across categories of actors, or some other cut at aggregation.

Making such assessments confronts the challenge of subjective perception. For

example, asking informants directly about ownership (however defined in an interview or a questionnaire) is likely to elicit subjective responses based on individual perceptions. One approach to dealing with the subjectivity problem would be to ask questions about the distinguishing components associated with ownership (see Issue 3 below) without labelling them as such. Another potentially interesting approach, which could be combined with the first, would be to ask respondents what ownership might look like to them—the answers could be used to help identify particular biases and could contribute to clarifying the concept.

The bias issue can be especially problematic in situations where outsiders have limited independent knowledge or understanding of internal dynamics. For example, in post-war Iraq, technical advisors in the Coalition Provisional Authority believed their Iraqi counterparts in central ministries who told them that funds allocated to provincial and municipal service delivery units would be wasted due to lack of political will and weak administrative capacity. However, advisors of the Local Governance Program, who worked in the provinces and cities outside of Baghdad, had a different perspective based on their interactions with local officials and citizens groups.¹⁷ With high levels of insecurity, it can be extremely difficult for outsiders to interact with a sufficient number of residents to collect information and triangulate on disparate or conflicting views.

ISSUE 3: SORTING OUT OWNERSHIP COMPONENTS AND LINKAGES

As Killick's definition suggests and my previous research confirms, ownership is also connected to relationships and social dynamics among actors within the country, the characteristics of the changes undertaken, and their degree of acceptability. Some international agencies consider the designation of the national government to take the lead in post-conflict reconstruction programs as an operational proxy for ownership. Yet such programs, by their nature, are products of external intervention, and thus, in terms of Killick's definition, they pose a significant challenge to the development of ownership. To generate useful guidance, analytic frameworks to describe and assess ownership need to expand to incorporate more elements than management responsibility.

A Model of Ownership

A fundamental task is to disaggregate ownership into some meaningful components. Building on my earlier work—which analyzed political will for anti-corruption activities and policy reform—and corroborated by analyses of pro-poor policy design and implementation,¹⁸ ownership can be broken down into six components:

1. *Government initiative*: This component concerns the source of the impetus for a particular policy or program choice. As noted above, ownership is questionable when the initiative for change comes totally from external actors. Some degree of initiative from domestic decision makers must exist in order to talk meaningfully of ownership and political will.

2. *Choice of policy/program based on balanced consideration and analysis of options*,

anticipated outcomes, and cost/benefits: When domestic actors choose policies and actions based on their own assessments of the benefits likely to be obtained, the alternatives and options, and the costs to be incurred, then one can credibly speak of independently derived preferences and willingness to act.

3. *Mobilization of stakeholders:* This component concerns the extent to which government actors consult with, engage, and mobilize stakeholders. Do decision makers reach out to members of civil society and the private sector to advocate for the changes envisioned? Are legislators involved? Are there ongoing efforts to build constituencies in favor of the new policies and programs?

4. *Public commitment and allocation of resources:* To the extent that domestic decision makers reveal their policy preferences publicly and assign resources to achieve those announced policy and program goals, these actions contribute to a positive assessment of ownership of, and political will for, change. As various observers have noted, when poor countries commit to changes that are funded by donor resources rather than their own, the assessment of ownership can be muddled.

5. *Continuity of effort:* Another component of ownership is the assignment of resources and responsibilities over the long-term to achieve goals. One-shot or episodic efforts signal weak and/or wavering ownership. Post-conflict reconstruction programs, by their very nature, are long-term undertakings.

6. *Learning and adaptation:* Ownership is revealed when domestic actors establish a process for tracking policy/program progress, and actively manage implementation by adapting to emerging circumstances over time. However, learning can also apply to domestic decision makers observing policies, practices, and programs from other countries and selectively adopting them for their own use. In this case, “tailoring and adapting to local conditions confers ownership of the policy content.”¹⁹

Strong ratings on each of these six components add up to the most powerful case for ownership. Variations in ratings on the components permit the kind of detailed, relative assessments and situation-specific determinations I discuss above, allowing nuanced considerations of degrees of ownership, from weak to strong. The six components can also be used for intra-state analyses, for example, looking at ownership among central versus local-level actors.

Linkages

Ownership and political will do not exist or develop in a vacuum, but are influenced by the sociopolitical environment that actors operate within. Thus, identification and understanding of the linkages between actors and their environment, in terms of the demands, pressures, and incentives created, are important to capturing a full picture of ownership and political will. Besides the donor-country relations discussed above, the governance structures and processes that connect government officials and civil society are important influences on ownership. Their existence is implicit in Killick’s definition of ownership, cited above, and is explicitly addressed in much of the literature on community-led development and empowerment.²⁰ Domestic decision makers’ degree of ownership

for reforms will emerge as a function of a calculus based on demand-side factors as well as the supply side of international aid. A similar supply-and-demand dynamic characterizes the development of capacity to implement the reforms that decision makers commit to.²¹

In post-conflict situations, these demand-driven influences on ownership and political will are often underdeveloped and emergent, given that citizens may not have had opportunities to engage with, or provide input to, public officials regarding their interests and needs beyond clientelist relationships. An important element of donor assistance for post-conflict reconstruction aims precisely to establish and build these new demand-side linkages through the introduction of democratic governance systems.

ISSUE 4: PLACING OWNERSHIP IN THE POST-CONFLICT STATE RECONSTRUCTION CONTEXT

The practical requirements for stabilization operations and post-conflict reconstruction pose challenges for enacting ownership-enhancing, country-led principles. Key drivers that shape stabilization and reconstruction efforts include the exigencies of preparedness, quick deployment and intervention, and coordination among external actors. These also affect prospects for the transition to peace and stability, and longer-term development. For example, the pressures for speed in demobilization and disarmament and restoration of basic services may be at odds with the longer-term considerations of how to integrate state actors as leaders, to the point where they will support and take ownership of reconstruction programs.²² The gap between the short- and long-term post-conflict objectives tends to be wider in countries that have experienced prolonged periods of breakdown in public institutions, services, and security. Stability and reconstruction operations face trade-offs between national ownership and capacity building and the need to achieve short-term results and to assure financial accountability.²³

Among these trade-offs is the concern for the legitimacy of a new government, which needs to be able to demonstrate to its citizens that it can provide them with something of value versus short-term capacity and efficiency.²⁴ When donors step in and bypass governments in favor of managing their own independent programs, and/or contracting with international NGOs and private firms for services, citizens are unlikely to see the post-conflict government as legitimate and worthy of support. Government actors become resentful, and may resist or only passively support externally-driven programs. These dynamics undercut the transfer of ownership from peacekeepers and donor agencies to domestic actors.²⁵

When governments have primary responsibility for managing post-conflict assistance, setting aid agendas, and organizing stakeholder consultations, these processes help to build legitimacy, as well as support the effective restoration of services and sustainable reconstruction.²⁶ These outcomes are all positively associated with ownership, and to achieve them some measure of capacity is needed,

hence the source of a major dilemma for external interveners.

There is the need to identify factors that allow for context specificity and for refining “one size fits all” approaches to post-conflict reconstruction. Capacity-building templates risk oversimplification and tend to discount the impact of situational, historical, and individual leadership factors. One avenue to introduce more nuanced approaches is to undertake assessments of ownership and political will using the model I briefly sketched above. Among the lessons from experience with policy reform is the importance of leaders who can set direction, engender legitimacy for change, and build constituencies (policy champions).²⁷ Identifying and working with such leaders can be a critical step toward establishing ownership and political will in fragile and post-conflict countries. As noted earlier, sorting the conflict entrepreneurs and spoilers from the “good guys” is rarely straightforward. However, a growing body of literature and experience on capacity-building in fragile and failed states addresses these issues; for example, the work of the multi-donor DAC Working Group on service delivery in fragile states.²⁸

CONCLUSIONS

The title of this essay encapsulates one of the maxims of external assistance for post-conflict reconstruction. A sustainable transition to peace and societal rebuilding requires that what begins as a process originated by outsiders becomes owned by domestic actors with the political will to carry reconstruction and reforms forward on their initiative. Detecting and reinforcing ownership and political will can be enhanced by (1) understanding how the donor-country relationship affects the interests and motivation of country actors (and not simply national decision makers), (2) sensitivity to measurement problems, and (3) breaking down the components of ownership and their links to environmental factors. The often messy and turbulent dynamics of stability and reconstruction operations, however, pose difficulties for peacekeepers and donors looking to achieve progress rapidly.

The question mark added to the title’s maxim about ownership reflects the challenges involved in promoting ownership beyond simply assessing it. International political and diplomatic pressures tend to impose stabilization and reconstruction timetables that call for overly optimistic and ambitious milestones despite the lessons of experience, which tell us that state and societal rebuilding are complex and long-term endeavors. In response to these pressures, numerous temptations arise for donors to take shortcuts, with negative consequences for ownership, sustainable capacity, and legitimacy, as discussed above. Better understanding of the intricacies of ownership and political will, and of their impacts on stabilization and reconstruction operations, can help interveners resist those temptations in the future.

Notes

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