

NATIONAL OWNERSHIP AND POST-CONFLICT PEACE BUILDING: FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE

TIMOTHY DONAIS

KEY POINTS

- Far from being an abstract academic debate, getting questions of “national ownership” right is crucial to the success or failure of post-conflict peace building;
- Putting ownership principles into practice requires, first and foremost, clarifying the meanings of ownership and the identity of the relevant owners;
- If peace building is to move beyond being an exercise in externally-driven social engineering, outsiders must do more to acknowledge peace-building resources that exist within conflict-affected societies themselves.
- While much of the ownership debate has focused on ownership by domestic political elites, the emergence of a “local turn” in peace-building scholarship strongly suggests that peace cannot be sustained in the absence of ownership on the part of domestic civil society.



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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing consensus, both within and outside the UN system, around the importance of national ownership for sustainable post-conflict peace building. Reflecting on the broader peace-building project in 2009, for example, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon invoked national ownership as a central theme, reflecting the common sense wisdom that any peace process not embraced by those who have to live with it is likely to fail (UN 2009).

There are eminently good reasons why ownership issues — which revolve around who has ultimate authority for setting and implementing policy priorities — now command greater attention on the international peace-building agenda. Conceptually, the inherent limits on the breadth, depth and

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duration of any external peace-building mission suggest that deep-rooted, sustainable change of the kind peace building seeks to bring about requires the long-term support and commitment of a critical mass of domestic actors. Empirically, the failure to achieve broad-based national ownership has been a key factor in troubled peace-building processes across a wide range of cases, while the most impressive success stories — including South Africa’s post-apartheid transition — have been associated with both strong national leadership and deep societal engagement.

While national ownership is now entrenched as a core tenet of UN engagement with fragile and war-affected states,¹ what is less clear is how national ownership principles should be operationalized. Despite the growing recognition that national ownership matters, it remains far from clear what outsiders can or should do to facilitate it, or how tensions that inevitably arise between the priorities of national owners and those of international actors in unstable postwar contexts should be reconciled.

If national ownership is to be taken seriously as an operational concept, such challenges need to be confronted head-on, not only by UN-led peace support operations, but equally by multilateral actors with peace-building mandates, bilateral donors (ownership being a foundational principle of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness) and foreign non-governmental organizations working in fragile and post-conflict environments. This brief, therefore, attempts to clarify the conceptual issues and challenges that up until now have stood in the way of effectively putting national ownership principles into practice in actual peace-

1 Ownership has also been a key theme in the high-level International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, and a centrepiece of the associated “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States.”

building situations, as well as to highlight emerging lessons and good practices with regard to respecting and facilitating national ownership.

KEY ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTATION

The effective implementation of national ownership principles requires, first and foremost, navigating the key tensions and ambiguities inherent in the concept itself. Three key interrelated issues in particular — concerning definitions, norms and accountability/control — feature prominently in any discussion about operationalizing national ownership in countries emerging from conflict.

OWNERS AND OWNERSHIP

Logically, any discussion of national ownership of peace building should begin with the question of “who owns what?”² While the subjects of national ownership are often taken to be state or government leaders (“political elites,” to use the generic term) few peace-building contexts feature genuinely representative, democratic governments. While elite pact-making remains central to contemporary peace building, many political elites make difficult peace partners due to the temptations of conflict-related corruption and the often irresistible pressures to consolidate rather than share power and to continue the conflict by other means. This provides a compelling argument, therefore, for broadening the scope of national ownership to include domestic civil society and the citizenry at large. Taking seriously the

question of which national actors matter also means recognizing the divided nature of any post-conflict society, where cleavages divide not only elites and masses, but also ethno-religious groups, as in Kosovo or Sri Lanka; in no peace-building context, therefore, is there ever a single, coherent set of national owners. In such contexts, which are marked by the fierce political struggles over legitimacy, authority and the absence of consensus on the “rules of the game”, the choices outsiders make about where to direct resources and with whom to work are unavoidably political and can serve to either reinforce or unsettle (for better or for worse) existing domestic configurations of power.

The object of ownership — what precisely is to be owned and how — also presents challenges in terms of operationalization. While minimalist views of national ownership emphasize domestic “buy-in” for externally determined policy prescriptions, maximalist views hold that peace-building processes “must be designed, managed, and implemented by local actors rather than external actors” (Nathan 2007, 4). On their own, however, neither position is fully convincing. Expecting domestic actors to uncritically embrace external norms and ideas as inherently superior to domestic ones is not only unrealistic, but has arguably led to cases of “virtual peace,” where external norms and institutions are thinly rooted and have minimal impact on domestic governance practices (Richmond and Franks 2007). At the same time, the “ownership as authorship” perspective ignores the reality that if domestic actors were fully capable of constructively managing their own problems, there would be no need for external intervention in the first place.

² The author is grateful for this formulation to one participant at a workshop held on March 14, 2011 at the UN Peacebuilding Support Office in New York. A full report on this workshop, entitled *From Rhetoric to Practice: Operationalizing National Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* is available at: www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pbso/pdf/national_ownership_report.pdf

NORMATIVE TENSIONS

The normative core of the debate regarding the meaning of ownership hinges on whether national ownership is an absolute right, consistent with internationally recognized principles of sovereignty and self-determination, or a conditional right, contingent on the acceptance of key international norms, such as respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law (Sending 2010). This debate touches on both the means and ends of peace building, with the conventional view maintaining that peace is best built through the progressive implementation of internationally agreed upon liberal-democratic norms and institutions. An alternate view holds that the primary responsibility of external actors in peace-building contexts is to “create space” in which domestic actors can develop their own solutions, which are grounded in domestic culture, institutions and traditions (Bush 1996). Between these two poles, there is a growing recognition that most peace-building processes lead to hybrid outcomes, where international norms, institutions and practices interact with those at the domestic level (Mac Ginty 2011). For external actors, navigating this process of hybridization in ways that produce sustainable, domestically legitimate and peaceful outcomes lies at the very heart of the national ownership challenge.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONTROL

If the debate over the meanings of ownership is ultimately a normative one, discussions around operationalization come down to questions of control. In other words, does final authority for the design and implementation of peace-building initiatives rest with international actors, who provide funding, expertise and normative scaffolding for much contemporary peace building, or with domestic actors, who have to live

with the consequences of peace building in ways that outsiders do not? Even where there is broad agreement on overarching goals, tensions invariably arise across the international-domestic divide on issues of timing, sequencing and prioritization. While a commitment to national ownership principles implies, logically, that final authority should reside with national actors, international actors have historically proven unwilling to cede ultimate authority to their national counterparts. In fragile, post-conflict environments, legitimate questions persist concerning both the capacity and the commitment of national actors to exercise final authority over developing and implementing peace-building agendas.

Accountability questions also factor into broader debates over control. It is often noted that donor agencies and other international actors are more accountable to their own national capitals and headquarters than to the citizens of conflict-affected states, and face constant pressure to deliver concrete, measurable, value-for-money results within relatively narrow timeframes. National ownership strategies — which may require extensive and time-consuming consultations with domestic parties, which seldom produce immediately measurable results, and which are by definition less susceptible to external control and management — sit uncomfortably with such imperatives. Reconciling the demands for responsible, efficient and effective delivery of international assistance with the broader challenges of facilitating and securing national ownership thus remains a key challenge.

OPERATIONALIZING NATIONAL OWNERSHIP: EMERGING LESSONS AND GOOD PRACTICES

The dilemmas described above pose real and unavoidable challenges to the implementation of

national ownership principles in real-world peace-building contexts. Their very intractability has led international peace builders, almost by default, to emphasize minimalist understandings of ownership, which privilege international norms, agency and knowledge (Sending 2009). While there is growing recognition that the “ownership as buy-in” perspective is inadequate and often paternalistic, this need not necessarily imply unconditional acceptance of the alternative “ownership as authorship” view. Instead, one way of working through the basic dilemmas posed by the ownership debate is to see ownership less in binary terms (peace building as either externally driven or nationally owned) and more in terms of the dynamic relationship between international and domestic actors. Although in many post-conflict settings there is a strong case to be made for more national and less international ownership, operationalizing national ownership principles is a matter of negotiating a context-appropriate balance between the international and the national in terms of both the substance and the mechanics of peace building. While a close regard for context implies that there can be no universal template for the implementation of national ownership principles, it is still possible to identify a range of lessons learned and emerging good practice from the empirical record of post-Cold War peace building.

MAKING SPACE FOR DOMESTIC KNOWLEDGE, PRACTICES AND RESOURCES

Moving fully beyond the now-stereotyped view of peace building as an exercise in externally driven social engineering means outsiders must do more to acknowledge existing peace-building resources within the post-conflict society itself. Regardless of the extent of wartime destruction, all conflict-affected societies

possess stores of social and cultural resources that enjoy broad domestic legitimacy and serve as important sources of social capital that can be deployed in support of peace building. Volker Boege et al. (2008) have, for example, demonstrated that the relative stability found in conflict-affected societies such as Somaliland and Bougainville³ is the product of hybrid political orders combining modern democratic practices with customary and traditional institutions. In these cases, “grounded legitimacy” has been achieved through the pursuit of “deliberate strategies for supporting the marriage of indigenous, customary and communal institutions of governance with introduced, Western state institutions, with a view to creating constructive interaction and positive mutual accommodation” (OECD 2011, 38). While it remains difficult to generalize about the specific forms “hybrid peace governance” (Belloni 2012) should take in any given context, the key principle here is the more that peace-building processes can be grounded in locally legitimate and widely accepted norms, practices and institutions the more likely they are to endure.

Mainstreaming local knowledge and resources into peace-building processes also requires viewing international capacity as a “mechanism of last resort” (UN 2011, 12). In practical terms, this means everything from prioritizing domestic firms in international procurement processes to accommodating traditional or informal justice institutions in rule of law reform processes (as has happened, increasingly, with the *shura/jirga* system in Afghanistan). Such considerations are of special relevance in the area of transitional justice,

3 Somaliland emerged as a relatively, stable, autonomous entity from the chaos of state collapse in Somalia in the 1990s, while the construction of a “new” political order in Bougainville began in 2001 when a peace agreement ended the region’s war of secession against Papua New Guinea; the emergence of hybrid political orders in both cases was at least partially enabled by a relatively “light” international peace-building presence; see Boege et al (2008).

where — as Rwanda’s *gacaca* trials have demonstrated (Betts 2005) — the links between social norms and cultural rituals on the one hand, and the complex dynamics of forgiveness and reconciliation on the other, are particularly strong. Integrating domestic knowledge and resources into peace-building efforts requires, as a corollary, the ability to recognize such resources and understand their potential as instruments of peace building. While it would be a mistake to overlook domestic institutions, traditions and practices as sources of peace building, it would be just as erroneous to uncritically romanticize them, as some may be fundamentally abusive or exclusionary (Mac Ginty 2008). A recurring lesson of the national ownership debate, therefore, is not only that external actors should be more sensitive to domestic culture and context, but they must also develop better, more finely tuned instruments for understanding domestic perceptions of legitimacy and potential domestic drivers of positive political change (Pouligny 2005, 507).

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Conflict corrodes and destroys human, infrastructural and institutional capacities, and such capacities need to be rebuilt if national actors are to exercise a meaningful degree of ownership over events in the post-conflict period. As noted above, however, war-torn societies are never fully without capacity. One of the early challenges of post-conflict capacity building, therefore, lies in developing clear understandings of not only critical capacity gaps and deficits, but also of existing capacities and the means through which these might best be supported.

In part due to the difficult trade-offs involved between longer-term capacity development and the shorter-term imperatives of delivering international assistance

effectively and efficiently, many of the lessons learned in the capacity development field have to do with poor practices to be avoided rather than good practices to be emulated. It is clear, for example, that one-off trainings and workshops offer relatively little value-for-effort in terms of the sustainable transfer of knowledge and skills. International organizations are often guilty as well of capacity-taking, primarily through hiring highly qualified national staff as translators, drivers or in relatively junior administrative positions (Wilén 2009). Capacity-substitution, where international staff, advisers or consultants take on executive roles in project management or public administration — ostensibly in the name of efficiency or because of an absence of domestic capacity — has been an equally prominent issue (Huang and Harris 2006). In particular, the practice of creating management systems outside of the institutional structures of the host state — such as the ubiquitous project implementation unit⁴ — is now widely seen as undermining long-term capacity building and organizational strengthening (OECD 2011, 84).

While the complex and context-specific issues involved in post-conflict capacity development operate against the articulation of straightforward operational guidelines, it is possible to discern an emerging set of practices in this area that are consistent with the imperatives of national ownership. First, on the principle that capacity development should be driven by demand and not supply, external donors should be prepared to invest considerable time working with their host-country counterparts in advance planning and co-prioritization. In this sense, strategic dialogue and joint

4 As part of the larger effort to rebuild the Afghan National Army following the overthrow of the Taliban regime, for example, the administrative functions of the Afghan Ministry of Defence were almost entirely taken over by the United States (OECD 2011: 85).

“dilemma analysis” is more likely to generate genuine partnerships across the international-national divide, enabling national ownership as domestic partners develop vested stakes in the success of projects they have themselves shaped and directed (Tarp and Rosén 2012). Similar considerations underpin arguments for early investments in building governmental capacity within fragile and post-conflict states to prioritize, manage and coordinate international assistance, not least by ensuring that project management structures are embedded within host-state governments at the earliest possible opportunity. At an even broader level, the emerging lesson is that there is no alternative but to work with the national institutions of conflict-affected states, however imperfect. In the words of a recent paper by the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti (2012), “supporting flawed governments may be a difficult choice, but investing in them with appropriate checks and balances will lead to stronger systems, better service delivery and more accountability to citizens.”

OWNERSHIP BEYOND ELITES

Despite an ongoing tendency to conflate national ownership with ownership by governments or elites, the recent emergence of a “local turn” (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013) in peace-building scholarship strongly suggests that peace cannot be sustained in the absence of ownership on the part of domestic civil society as well. As the repository of much of the local knowledge and resources noted above, civil society plays a crucial role in peace building through legitimizing processes and projects, mediating among the state, society and international community, communicating local-level perspectives and priorities to decision-makers and implementing concrete peacebuilding and development programs.

Donor perspectives on civil society peace building have long been dominated by an ethos of modernization, which has meant attempting to (re-)create post-conflict civil societies in the image of those in the developed West. The relatively poor record of such efforts has, however, prompted some observers to suggest that outsiders should engage with sources of social capital embedded within the actual-existing civil society, rather than attempting to re-construct social capital upon new, and necessarily unfamiliar, foundations (Belloni 2008; Edwards 2009). While this need not preclude external support for domestically driven human rights or democracy movements, it does suggest the need to avoid instrumentalizing civil society actors as either inexpensive service providers or as local advocates for an externally driven peace process, and points to the need to find ways to work with, rather than against, deep-rooted patterns and traditions of social interaction.

While the modalities of civil society engagement will differ from case to case, examples of good practice usually feature the creation of multiple access points through which civil society actors can make their voices heard, from community peace councils at the local level to the UN Peacebuilding Commission at the macro level. Civil society ownership is also enhanced by involving civil society actors at the earliest possible stages of the peace process, while long-term accompaniment — coupled with long-term funding commitments — also contributes to sustainable civil society involvement as well as to productive and mutually beneficial learning across the international-local divide. At the same time, top-down efforts to support both the capacity and the willingness of state actors to create an enabling environment for civil society activity — whether through the articulation of clear legal frameworks for the regulation of associational life or through active engagement of civil society actors in sector-specific

policy dialogues — may be no less crucial than bottom-up support for the activities of individual civil society actors (Belloni 2008).

CONSENSUS-BUILDING AND COMMUNICATIONS

Facilitating national ownership of peace-building processes through broadening and deepening international engagement with post-conflict societies amounts to a strategy of participatory peace building (Chopra and Hohe 2004), which in turn calls on international actors to see themselves less as peace *builders* and more as peace *facilitators* (Sending 2009, 3-4). If a more substantive understanding of national ownership implies that peace is most likely to emerge only through patient, elicitive processes that seek to reconcile international norms with domestic practices, beliefs and traditions, then ultimately what is to be facilitated is an emergent societal consensus around what kind of peace, and what kind of society, is to be built in the aftermath of conflict. To a significant degree, therefore, this means focusing less on the ends of peace building (the consolidation of a liberal democratic state) and more on the means (processes that progressively strengthen state-society relations).

There is, therefore, considerable scope for the United Nations and other international actors to further develop their own institutional capacities “to promote, underpin and, where appropriate, facilitate broadly participatory national dialogue and consensus-building processes in fragile and post-conflict processes” (International Peace Academy 2004, 2). If they are to contribute to both the perception and the reality of national ownership, such processes have to be more than talking shops and must feed into — indeed, they must be integral components of — broader structures of decision making. The

facilitation of national dialogue processes, whether sectoral or comprehensive, also necessitates careful consideration of who is allowed or invited to participate. While not all potential stakeholders can be included, a balance needs to be struck between including those national actors in positions of power — whether elected officials, traditional chieftains or regional “strongmen” — and including traditionally vulnerable or neglected groups, such as women, youth or vulnerable minorities.

Better communications across the international-domestic divide also represent a necessary complement to participatory peace-building strategies. Simon Haselock (2010, 1) argues that national ownership requires supplementing conventional unidirectional approaches to public information with “an approach to communications that places as much emphasis on listening to the local population as on transmitting information to it.” Such strategies not only enable outsiders to gain better understandings of the domestic context, they can also represent important avenues for the exercise of local agency. Beyond traditional media, the explosion of information and communications technology is opening up new possibilities and opportunities on this front. One recent pilot project in the South Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, involved the use of inexpensive cellphone technology to enable local communities to post information on key issues they face in their daily lives, from crop failures to population movements to conflict incidents (Search for Common Ground 2011, 16). While providing an important source of information for external actors, the expansion of such opportunities — and the associated possibilities for crowdsourcing and crowdfeeding — has considerable potential in terms of enhancing both the voice and the agency of domestic populations in war-torn contexts.

CONCLUSION

The principle of national ownership has come to occupy, in the space of a few short years, a central place within the emerging paradigm of contemporary post-conflict peace building. Despite this, both the conceptual ambiguity underpinning the concept and the persistent gap between rhetoric and practice suggests that, as Laurie Nathan (2008, 19) has argued, there remains a pressing need for “political and practical solutions to the political and practical challenges” of operationalizing national ownership. In the absence of such solutions, the danger is that the concept will become little more than a buzzword, compelling in principle, but ultimately lacking in substance, leading both to charges of hypocrisy against international actors who use the term and growing cynicism among “national owners” themselves.

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