

From Rhetoric to Practice: Operationalizing National Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

Workshop Report¹ June 2011

Executive Summary

- The notion of national ownership is increasingly central to debates around post-conflict peacebuilding, yet it remains far from clear how the concept should be put into practice. Since the challenge of operationalizing national ownership is inextricably bound up with debates over the meaning of the term, ongoing contestation over both the normative and empirical content of national ownership will continue to impact debates over implementation. Ultimately, putting national ownership principles into practice must begin with a clear answer to the question of “who owns what?”.
- At its core, the notion of national ownership is grounded in the fundamental premise that peacebuilding cannot be solely an outside-in activity, with international actors as its primary agents; successful peacebuilding requires the active involvement and engagement of local actors at all levels of society.
- While state-level political elites are, unavoidably, key national owners in peacebuilding processes, it would be a mistake to conflate elite ownership and national ownership. Civil society in post-conflict societies – while neither inherently progressive nor unified – are also crucial national owners in terms of their ability to legitimize peacebuilding processes at the grassroots level, to connect state and citizen, and to reconcile international norms with local realities. Care must also be taken, however, to avoid instrumentalizing domestic civil society as agents of an externally-driven peace process and to recognize that civil society in post-conflict environments may differ markedly from Western understandings of civil society in terms of both form and function.
- Strategies to operationalize national ownership principles are beginning to emerge at the level of the UN system, and range from approaches which privilege consensus-building exercises – in the area of security sector reform, for example – as a means of specifying clearly what is to be owned, to practical measures outlined in the UN’s recent civilian capacity review for more effectively drawing on local resources and expertise in post-conflict environments.
- As the UN is increasingly committed to a set of international norms around good governance, a fundamental challenge faced by the organization is how to address situations in which national ownership is exercised in ways that directly conflict with such norms. The use of conditionality by donors as a means of steering the policy behaviour of national actors in particular directions also raises fundamental questions about whether national ownership is an absolute right or a conditional right.
- The post-conflict transitions of both South Africa and Rwanda lend credence to the argument that coherent and cohesive national leadership is crucial to successful peacebuilding processes. Much work remains to be done, however, to understand

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precisely how international actors can support the establishment of strong, peacebuilding-oriented national leadership in cases where it fails to emerge organically, and how capacity development efforts by the UN and other international actors can be made more effective.

Introduction

On 14 March 2011, the UN's Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) hosted a one-day workshop aimed at advancing debate within the UN system on both the meanings and practices of national ownership in the context of post-conflict peacebuilding. The workshop, co-organized by the PBSO, Wilfrid Laurier University and the City University of New York's Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies², brought together practitioners from across the UN system, representatives of UN Member States, as well as academics and NGO representatives.

The starting point for the workshop was the emerging consensus – both within and outside the UN system – that national ownership is a crucial prerequisite for sustainable post-conflict peacebuilding. In his recent report on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict, the Secretary-General invokes “the imperative of national ownership” as a central theme, reflecting the commonsense wisdom that any peace process not embraced by those who have to live with it is likely to fail. Despite this, the concept of national ownership remains sufficiently broad and vague to sustain multiple and quite diverse interpretations: while some equate it with the need to secure local “buy-in” for an externally-designed peacebuilding agenda, others suggest that national ownership implies that peacebuilding should be designed, managed and implemented by local actors, with outsiders in a supporting role. For some, central governments are the only relevant national owners. For others, ownership includes local governments, communities and civil society. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of national ownership, therefore, it remains far from clear what it means, what external actors such as the UN and its agencies can or should do in order to facilitate it, or how tensions that inevitably arise between the priorities of national owners and those of international donors in unstable post-war contexts are to be reconciled.

Over the course of three separate panels – the first focusing on civil society and national ownership, the second emphasizing responses in the UN system to the challenges of operationalizing national ownership principles and the third highlighting the perspectives of UN Member States on national ownership – workshop participants confronted many of the complex issues involved in the ownership debate.

Session 1: Lessons from the Field: Ownership and Civil Society

Central governments are often regarded as the international community's key domestic partner in peacebuilding operations. But discussions of local ownership inevitably raise fundamental questions about the degree to which domestic civil society represents a complementary, and in some cases an alternative, centre of gravity for peacebuilding within war-affected societies themselves. In this context, the semantic distinction between national ownership and local

² Financial support for the workshop was also provided by the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

ownership signals an ongoing and unresolved tension within the peacebuilding discourse between top-down *state-building* approaches focusing on the institutions of national government and bottom-up *peacebuilding* approaches, which pay greater attention to the role of civil society actors and to the relationship between state and society in post-conflict contexts. While both approaches recognize increasingly that civil society in post-war countries has an important role to play in both deepening and sustaining peacebuilding processes, the goal of this session was to explore the practical ways in which civil society actors can and do exercise ownership over peacebuilding processes, and where international support for such ownership is best directed.

Generalizing about the role of civil society actors in peacebuilding processes is challenging for a range of reasons. Both concepts – civil society and peacebuilding – remain difficult to define precisely, making it difficult to measure the impact of the one on the other. At the same time, the nature and configuration of civil society – in terms of capacity, institutionalization and relationship to formal state structures as well as broader social formations – varies widely from one context to another. The relatively cooperative relationship between Burundian women’s groups and their government in that country’s peace process, for example, stands in stark contrast with the situation in Nepal, where political deadlock has persisted through the post-conflict period in part because civil society groups are deeply mistrustful of the national government. Nor can civil society be considered a uniformly coherent or cohesive set of actors; several speakers noted the distinction between “civil” and “uncivil” society, underlining the reality that progressive human rights advocacy organizations co-exist in the civil society realm with organizations that perpetuate division and oppose peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Different views emerged as well about the role of international intervention vis-à-vis domestic civil society actors. Some speakers emphasized the weak and fragmented nature of civil society in post-conflict spaces and argued that international support for capacity development was a necessary prerequisite for greater civil society ownership of peacebuilding processes. Others, however, cautioned against viewing domestic civil society instrumentally as local agents of an internationally-driven peacebuilding agenda; the tendency to see civil society in primarily Western terms may in fact blind outsiders to the capacities that exist within domestic civil society structures, even if they may not look like Western NGOs with offices, letterhead and English-speaking professional staff.

Despite these differences, there is a compelling case to be made that civil society actors in post-conflict situations play a crucial role in peacebuilding through legitimizing processes and projects, mediating among state, society and international community, communicating local-level perspectives and priorities to decision-makers and implementing concrete peacebuilding and development programmes. Although civil society can never replace governmental actors as owners of peacebuilding processes, policies lacking widespread popular legitimacy are likely to be neither viable nor sustainable over the longer term; engagement beyond the state is critical for successful implementation of any peacebuilding agenda. Moreover, there is a fundamental necessity of achieving broad inclusion if ownership is to be achieved, especially in cases where the legitimacy of governments themselves is in question; genuine national ownership, in this context, involves a consensus-building exercise across the state-society interface on the goals, policies and programmes of peacebuilding and implementation of peacebuilding activities. In cases where central governments are fragile, local actors need to do crucial work on the ground

and even in cases where civil society is weak, these groups are sometimes the first to organize because they are less encumbered by bureaucracy. In Nepal and Sierra Leone for example, it was civil society groups that mobilized resources to support national action plans on women, peace and security. Similarly, civil society actors also represent a crucial source of knowledge about local-level political and social dynamics that is largely inaccessible to outsiders but crucial to the success or failure of peacebuilding initiatives. As one participant commented, “the better the inputs, the better the outputs.”

At a fundamental level, therefore, discussions of local ownership highlight the need for the international community to engage with existing political and social structures beyond national governments, which is a particular challenge for intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations whose primary interlocutors have always been national governments. It is also incumbent on donors and other international actors to develop a better understanding of existing social structures and sources of social capital that exist within post-conflict societies, both as a means of understanding and supporting peacebuilding agency at the sub-state level and as a means of understanding the kinds of issues and voices that need to be incorporated into the ongoing dialogue on peacebuilding. Recent experience in the Philippines, for example, draws attention to the need to work with ‘community captains’ that represent the interests of various groups as a means of integrating their voices within a broader national conversation around peacebuilding. Another set of critical local owners in the Philippine case are Muslim women religious scholars. These women are deeply connected with and attuned to the needs of local communities, but have remained a generally untapped resources for helping to frame women’s participation in peacebuilding processes in ways that are consistent with the core tenets of Islam.

Burundi’s recent peace process offers some positive lessons about engaging civil society in peacebuilding processes. Women’s voices were included in the peacebuilding process from the outset, and the inclusion of women’s priorities in Burundi’s national peacebuilding strategy, as well as their involvement in monitoring and evaluation frameworks, helped ensure the active and positive engagement of women’s groups at all levels. The Burundian case points to the importance of generating national consensus around a peacebuilding strategy which is inclusive of a broad range of actors and interests at all levels of society, and through which the contributions of varied actors – from local to international – can be coordinated. While the creation of inclusive strategic frameworks may represent a monumental undertaking in divided post-war contexts, such consensus-building exercises not only hold the promise of strengthening state-society relations over the longer term but also ensure greater coordination of effort and complementarity of action.

In trying to conceptualize the role of national ownership in relation to the broader issue of civil society engagement, addressing the problems and opportunities posed by elites is central. While there is a danger of legitimizing and reinforcing the power of elites through dealing with them directly, it is nonetheless critical to engage these structural sources of local political power. In the Philippines, for example, the fact that political elites are also major landowners makes direct engagement with them crucial if agrarian reform – an important element in the broader fight against inequality – is to be comprehensively addressed. Addressing the issue of elites also points out the need to clarify the difference between ‘national’ and ‘local’ ownership. This distinction highlights the importance of exercising caution in using ‘national’ as equivalent with

‘local’ because of the danger of equating elite interests as with those of society as a whole. Treating elites as the only relevant local owners runs the risk of entrenching elite power and privilege at the expense of other groups, thereby undermining the prospects for sustainable peace.

In conclusion, the session appeared to point towards an emerging consensus that if there is to be local ownership, the interactions between the international community, national governments and other local actors must go beyond consultation and develop into an ongoing dialogue. In this context, the notion of ownership as buy-in or cooptation was dismissed as insufficient to the broader agenda of achieving substantive national ownership. Establishing deep linkages between international agencies and civil society groups is thus a key step to moving beyond consultation. That said, since not all civil society groups represent an unequivocally positive force, decisions concerning which civil society actors to engage with, and how, remain unavoidably political.

Session 2: Advancing the National Ownership Agenda within the UN System

The broader goal of this session was to take stock of the debate at the level of UN headquarters on moving from principle to practice on the national ownership issue. Despite a widely-shared desire to get beyond semantics, one clear message from this session was that the challenge of operationalizing national ownership principles is inextricably bound up with ongoing debates over the meaning of the term. The concept of national ownership is sufficiently broad and ambiguous to command widespread support, yet the vagueness of the term makes it inherently difficult to operationalize. Panelists offered differing interpretations of what national ownership could mean: one described it as a mindset rather than a scientific concept, another described it as a rhetorical device designed to justify the international presence within sovereign states, while a third suggested that only by specifying what precisely is to be owned can the notion of national ownership be adequately operationalized. Ongoing contestation over both the normative and empirical content of national ownership will therefore continue to impact debates over implementation.

Discussions concerning the identity of the relevant national owners also carried over from the first session. Given its intergovernmental character, the United Nations necessarily privileges working with state actors, hence the preference for the term “national ownership” over the alternative of “local ownership”. At the same time, however, the legitimacy, accountability and public-service orientation of political elites in post-conflict contexts is regularly both questioned and questionable. Since elite interests may differ substantially from the broader public interest, the focus of national ownership must go beyond a narrow emphasis on ownership by government. Questions of legitimacy in post-conflict spaces are inherently political, particularly as conflict disrupts or destroys mechanisms of democratic accountability, and thus the question of who are the relevant local actors is also deeply political. While any meaningful conception of national ownership must include political elites, who can neither be avoided nor completely circumvented, panelists also suggested that national ownership strategies need to include both non-state actors and measures to hold political elites accountable. Implicit in this discussion was an understanding that post-conflict societies are far from homogenous, and operationalizing national ownership almost necessarily entails grappling with the challenge of reconciling different visions and priorities of diverse actors. Ultimately, any discussion of operationalizing

national ownership in specific contexts must begin by clearly specifying who the relevant national actors are, and how they stand in relation to each other.

Beyond definitional questions, much of this session was devoted to the question of the legitimate roles and responsibilities of UN actors in peacebuilding contexts. In this context, two dominant themes emerged. On the one hand, ongoing work in the area of security sector reform is focusing on the elaboration of a common national vision as a key component of any national ownership strategy; UN actors can play crucial roles in helping to facilitate the development of such a vision among a cacophony of often competing local voices. Having such a vision in place provides an answer to the question of what is to be owned, and enables capacity development to be directed in support of national stakeholders' implementation efforts. The challenge here, beyond consensus-building, is one of supporting the capacity of national actors to prioritize, to control, to allocate, and ultimately to coordinate the actions of international actors.

On the other hand, the UN is also increasingly committed to a set of international norms around good governance, and a fundamental challenge faced by the organization is how to address situations when national ownership is exercised in ways that directly conflict with such norms. As one intervener noted, the national ownership debate cannot avoid the question of whether international actors such as the UN have the right to determine what behaviour is acceptable in the name of national ownership and what is not. Similar issues animate discussions around conditionality; can international actors legitimately condition financial assistance and support on adherence by local actors to good governance norms, or does the use of such conditionality violate the fundamental premise of national ownership? While the role of external resources in peacebuilding contexts remains a central issue in the debate over national ownership – and represents a key source of donor leverage in peacebuilding environments – it remains unclear how much of this influence donors can be, or should be, expected to relinquish in the name of national ownership. The question of whether ownership is an absolute right or a conditional right thus remains central to the broader debate over national ownership.

Managing coordination questions, particularly as they relate to the fine line separating development from peacebuilding, are also central to the efforts of the UN system to better facilitate national ownership in post-conflict contexts. While there have been improvements in recent years – particularly with the development of integrated mission planning for peace support missions – it also remains the case that planning for peace support remains largely top-down while planning for development – through the UN's Development Assistance Framework – tends to follow a bottom-up approach. Both approaches have different implications for questions of national ownership, suggesting that harmonizing procedures guiding UN engagement in post-conflict environments remains a work in progress.

Despite the challenges, the notion of national ownership is grounded in the fundamental premise that peacebuilding cannot be a solely outside-in activity, with international actors as its primary agents; successful peacebuilding requires the active involvement and engagement of local actors at all levels of society. In this context, the Secretary-General's Senior Advisory Group on Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict recently put forward a series of recommendations on facilitating greater engagement with domestic actors in peacebuilding contexts. Among the key recommendations on ownership:

- stronger international support for key government capacities, particularly capacities around aid coordination, policy development and public financial management;
- a greater emphasis on local procurement as a means of stimulating the local economy and developing the private sector;
- prioritizing the use of local capacity and expertise, to the extent of deploying international capacity only as a last resort; and
- taking seriously both the needs and the participation of women in peacebuilding contexts.³

The discussion of the ability of the UN – and the broader international community – to build capacity as a path to national ownership prompted one speaker to lament the poor record of capacity development in post-conflict environments. While capacity development is likely to remain a centerpiece of international peacebuilding efforts, greater attention needs to be focused on the practices and the impacts of capacity development, as well as how political interests are mediated through such efforts. Capacity development was also contrasted to capacity-disabling, and the possibility that dismantling political and social structures that stand in the way of sustainable peace may be just as important as building up new or reformed structures.

Beyond the discussion of the viability and desirability of proposed practical measures to enhance national ownership, there was also a call for greater humility on the part of international actors in peacebuilding contexts. Outsiders, in the words of one participant, too often spend more time telling than listening, and are often slow to recognize that in their interactions with local actors, they have as much to learn as to teach. At the same time, the UN must increasingly recognize that its legitimacy as well as its relevance in peacebuilding contexts can no longer be taken for granted, in part because it is no longer a purely neutral facilitator but rather a political and normative actor. In other words, peacebuilding will not build sustainable peace if it is conceived as a form of externally-driven social engineering.

In summary, the session demonstrated that while no definitive guidelines yet exist within the UN system on the question of operationalizing national ownership principles, the debate is moving forward on various fronts. At the same time, however, tensions between the respect for national ownership principles and the defence of the UN's role as a normative actor in promoting standards of domestic good governance are unlikely to be resolved definitively, but must rather be managed carefully in specific peacebuilding contexts.

³ *Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict: Independent Report of the Senior Advisory Group* (New York: United Nations, 2011).

Session 3: Member State Perspectives on Ownership

In trying to develop national ownership into an operational concept, it is important to emphasize the origins of the concept in efforts to legitimize the conditionality associated with structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s. In the context of peacebuilding, many of the themes prominent in the earlier debate – notable questions of national sovereignty and conditionality – continue to be front and centre.

One central theme to emerge from this session was that from the perspective of Member States – and particularly those Member States that have themselves navigated the transition from war to peace – is that national ownership must be discussed in relation to capacity, as capacity is virtually synonymous with national ownership. That is, capacity is the central variable that separates weak from functional states. In this regard, while sovereignty claims are often dismissed as merely rhetorical, they remain significant. If the international community is insufficiently attentive to sovereignty concerns, there is a substantial risk of weakening state capacity, and national ownership, rather than strengthening it.

Rwanda has attached great importance to local ownership through capacity development, which has been key to its successful transition over the course of the past 17 years. After the 1994 genocide, the country was in a state of disarray, with infrastructure, civil service and other core government services largely nonexistent. Although the Government of Rwanda initially welcomed international aid, it also made it clear from the outset that it was going to assert its own agency and leadership in the post-conflict peacebuilding and reconstruction process. Foreign donors and NGOs are welcome in Rwanda, but they must state their goals and clearly align them with the broader development agenda of the Government of Rwanda in order to ensure that they do not conflict with the state's long-term development objectives. At the same time, the Government of Rwanda chose to utilize the indigenous legal system as a means to engage in reconciliation process, and in doing so redevelop its functional capacities.

Rwanda's post-conflict experience is, in many ways, a successful example of a nationally-owned peacebuilding process, which has utilized foreign assistance while conceding little authority to the international community in terms of agenda setting and conditionality. Vision 2020, a state-led project aimed at achieving the Rwandan development goal of becoming a middle-income country operating as a knowledge hub, has defined a central role for the private sector to participate in the reconstruction process. The Government has maintained a position that donors and NGOs are not sufficient to lift Rwandans out of poverty. For this reason, internal stakeholders are included in the formulation of the national development strategy, particularly at a grassroots level. The strong leadership role played by the state has been instrumental in ensuring that the process moves forward in a systemic way.

On the broader question of donor conditionality, China's growing role in Africa in recent years has changed the dynamic considerably, as countries now have the option of whether to work with more traditional Western donor agencies and countries or sign deals with Chinese firms, both state-owned and those from the private sector. In Rwanda, the experience with China began in the pre-genocide era, and Rwandan officials have quite a positive view of the relationship. More generally, African states find it easier to work with China in comparison with Western donor

states or multilaterals because the Chinese tend not to impose their will on governments and are willing to make large and long-term investments, especially in the area of capital-intensive infrastructure.

While state leadership is often central to achieving national ownership, it is equally important to emphasize that national ownership in the context of peacebuilding necessarily implies more than government ownership. Although the state often serves as a key mediator with the international community and maintains considerable authority in the peacebuilding process, engagement with other actors remains critical for success. In post-conflict Rwanda civil society remained very strong and was extremely active throughout the peacebuilding process. Moreover, the government has made a conscious effort to involve civil society groups in the operation of its activities with women's groups and youth organizations. Partly as a result of these efforts, Rwanda now enjoys the distinction of having the highest percentage of women parliamentarians of any country in the world.

However, it is also important to draw attention to the specific contextual factors of each peacebuilding case in determining how national ownership might best be achieved. For instance if there is a clear victory that ends a conflict, such as in the case of Rwanda, there is much greater likelihood of strong leadership taking hold. Accordingly, in such cases there is a considerably greater likelihood for national unity in the peacebuilding process than in instances where civil society has a competing agenda with the ruling government, or in cases where a negotiated settlement leaves fundamental political issues unresolved. The experience of security sector reform in South Africa, where civil society was actively engaged, similarly shows that South Africans wanted to maintain primacy over the decision-making process in order to reflect their own conceptions of the issues and challenges at hand. So while inclusiveness can play an instrumental role in fostering a cohesive and robust peacebuilding agenda, certain contexts are more amenable to such approaches than others.

While the needs and experiences of individual post-conflict countries vary considerably and each context is characterized by unique specificities, they generally fall into three broad categories. The first includes those states that possess large amounts of natural resources and which are therefore able to self-finance reconstruction efforts, for example Angola, Kuwait and Nigeria. The second group includes states that require development assistance and generally lack large resource endowments, such as post-war Europe and contemporary Afghanistan. Finally there are post-conflict countries that are donor orphans. This group, which represents the majority of countries involved in post-conflict peacebuilding, fundamentally need assistance but lack a strong partner in the international community to achieve their goals. It is therefore important to emphasize that the trajectories of reconstruction and peacebuilding, and the dynamics of national ownership, are shaped by the initial conditions that characterize the post-conflict environment.

Generally speaking, strong governments tend to have much greater success in peacebuilding, which is precisely why developing strategies for national ownership in weak states remains so complicated and difficult. Further, natural resource endowments can also provide unique opportunities for the principle of national ownership to be realized by allowing countries rich in such factors to be able to pursue their own strategies, largely independent of international assistance. Rwanda and South Africa are both quite unique in that they had relatively strong

governments with a clear vision, whereas in Afghanistan and many other post-conflict countries the state apparatus is extremely fragile, and the societies deeply divided. In such cases, international actors continue to face deep and unavoidable dilemmas, many of which revolve around the relationship between domestic government capacity and political will. Efforts to develop state capacity in the absence of political will on the part of state elites to deploy that capacity towards peacebuilding, for example, may simply empower and enrich the corrupt and perpetuate the original conflict. At the same time, choosing to replace state capacity with international capacity, or to bypass weak, corrupt state structures by channeling donor funding through civil society actors may further undermine both state capacity and political will. Thus, while the key lesson from both Rwanda and South Africa is that capable and determined national leadership is a basic requirement for successful peacebuilding, international actors continue to struggle with the question of how to help generate such national leadership in places where it does not already exist.

**From Rhetoric to Practice:
Operationalizing National Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding**

**A Policy Workshop
UN Peacebuilding Support Office
Teacher's Building, 730 Third Ave., New York
18th floor, Room: Bryant Park**

Monday, 14 March 2011

AGENDA

9:30-11:00 Current Policy and Best Practice: Lessons from the Field

While central governments are often seen as primary in terms of national ownership, growing attention is being paid to engaging domestic civil society as “owners” of peacebuilding processes. What practical lessons, or best practices, can be drawn from recent efforts to support civil society ownership in post-war contexts? What obstacles exist to more effective international engagement with civil society actors?

11:00-11:30 Coffee break

**11:30-1:00 Advancing the National Ownership Agenda within the UN System:
Obstacles and Opportunities**

This session explores the challenges of operationalizing the concept of national ownership at agency and headquarters levels. What specific policies and practices need to be – or are being – put into place at the strategic level in order to facilitate national ownership, and what trade-offs are involved in this process? What are the implications of the Civilian Capacity Review for efforts to operationalize national ownership principles in UN peacebuilding efforts?

1:15-3:00 Working Lunch: Member State Perspectives on Ownership

Chair: Mr. Eloho Otobo, Director and Deputy Head, Peacebuilding Support Office

This session will elicit feedback from Member State representatives on the concept of national ownership and its implementation. How do UN Member States – both contributors and hosts of peacebuilding missions – understand the issues surrounding national ownership?