

IICD Research Brief – No 8, December 2003

Ownership and Partnership – Keys to Sustaining ICT-enabled Development Activities

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For investments in communication, information and knowledge to help reduce poverty, they need to be used in ways that help to **empower poor people** – so they can shape decisions that affect them, so they can grasp economic and social opportunities, so they can deal with misfortunes and disasters. For this empowerment to take place, however, the local stakeholders must be committed to an activity and have a sense of **ownership** of it, as evidenced by their taking on responsibilities for the activity and its outcomes. To foster a sense of ownership, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) projects, programmes, etc. should be designed to be 'ownership-friendly'. This means listening to the demands of all stakeholders from the start. It means carefully managing different stakeholder roles and relationships in and around an activity, adapting cooperation and partnership instruments to give greater value to reciprocity and shared commitments, building 'spaces' where ownership can be negotiated and developed, and fostering local capacities to create and drive such activities. In essence, we need to make sure that local stakeholders take on appropriate levels and types of responsibility, and that control is ultimately in their hands.

The Issues

Ownership of the priorities, the means and ends of development programmes by stakeholders – national governments, non-government organisations and interest groups – is increasingly seen as a necessary condition for sustainability and as a criterion for donors to support a new development activity.

Experiences with information, communication and ICTs however show us that it is not easy to get these ownership and partnership issues right. To give some examples:

A focus on technologies has resulted in many 'IT' projects where equipment is on the ground, where skills have been built or transferred, but where organisational commitment is limited to an individual 'champion' or two. Similarly, efforts to foster ICT-based networking often result in the creation of small entities driven by one or two champions. Mobilising 'buy-in' from presumed stakeholders or network members is hard to achieve.

'End-users' have been discovered and seen to not be benefiting from direct access to the new technologies or to the services promised. Despite the end-users being the supposed intended beneficiaries, they are not involved from the start. Moreover, the empowering potential of ICTs and information – in the sense that people can harness them for their own use – is more often replaced by projects in which systems and services are put in place to 'reach' them.

Finally, in a fast evolving technological climate, it is often felt that investments in ICTs must also be fast, demonstrating quick wins and convincing others that pilot efforts should be scaled up, mainstreamed, or replicated. This contrasts with the often-repeated view that development processes like ownership and partnership need sufficient time to take root.

These examples suggest that many current approaches to ICT-enabled development may not actually produce sustainable results, from an ownership perspective.



One way to move forward is to look more closely at 'how' we do ICT-enabled development, questioning our current methods and instruments. In particular, we can look at ownership and partnership issues that lie at the core of sustainable development. Enhancing these will make our efforts more sustainable.

The challenge is more urgent given the current enthusiasm for 'digital' projects and programmes and a general sense that many existing development problems can be leapfrogged through the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and associated tools.

In May 2003, the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) convened a meeting to examine issues of ownership and partnership in ICT-enabled development cooperation. Questions discussed concerned the different types of ownership that need to be developed, and how IICD, and organisations like it, can promote and foster high levels of local ownership. This research brief reports from these discussions. Some of the cases shared during the workshop are presented in this report.

Ownership in Focus

In preparing an evaluation for the Swedish government, Stefan Molund recently surveyed the notion of ownership in aid programmes. He suggests that "increased partner country ownership is one of the main prerequisites for more effective development assistance." Beyond this, he also argues that development itself can only be sustained when the local stakeholders of a development intervention take on responsibility for it, and its outcomes – essentially, when they take ownership and control.



He suggests that there are two main ways of looking at these issues: The first looks at the effectiveness of 'partnership' relations between development funders, broadly defined, and the local project owners or implementing agencies. The second looks at the degree of participation by local stakeholders, especially end-users, in designing and implementing a development

activity. The first of these usually focuses on north-south relations, on making them more balanced, and clarifying the roles of the various partners. The second is more concerned with local power dynamics and enhancing the influence and control of any local stakeholders, through more participation, transparency, and local accountability.

Molund basically concludes that more or better ownership by local stakeholders is crucial to the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of development activities. It is something that we should all aspire to, and design for.

Uganda governance case

Several local government actors had developed a joint ICT project. To facilitate coordination across the districts, a ministry agreed to support the decentralised efforts. Unfortunately, this ministry has developed such a high level of 'ownership' that the original partners are cut out from decisions and they are losing interest in the project. This case illustrates a situation where the original owners seem to have lost control of their project. Possible avenues to pursue include re-convening all the original and new stakeholders to discuss the issues in an attempt to re-define responsibilities and roles. In addition, local stakeholders in each district can be mobilised to try and put pressure on the ministry concerned.

Barriers and Solutions

However, as was noted above, issues of ownership and partnership are not easy. Some of the challenges identified in the workshop are discussed here.

Defining ownership

First, we need to clarify the terminology. What is meant by ownership? Discussions in this area can be vague and lead to confusion, especially when we are dealing with many stakeholders. Terms like ownership, commitment, and partnership are bandied around without much precision.

Some people focus on inequitable and unbalanced donor-recipient relations – calling for more ownership (by recipients) and less ownership (by donors). Others refer to this relationship as a 'partnership'. But, here also, there is confusion. Many agencies confer the status of 'partner' on anyone that they provide funds to – and sometimes also to those that give them funds.

Others look at the issue from a grassroots perspective, seeing all those actors with a potential interest or stake in an activity as potential owners whose participation is called for. In direct contrast, the owners of an initiative are sometimes considered to be those who directly 'run' it, or those who have ultimate legal responsibility.

At first glance, the idea that ownership is vested in those who have legal title to an initiative or project seems a rather straightforward notion. However, as many of the experiences in the workshop showed, legal statutes and articles of association, while important in themselves, are not usually sufficient on their own to ensure that all desired stakeholders can take on their hoped-for responsibilities. For this to happen, the stakeholders need to have a 'sense of ownership' – even, and usually, where their legal title is absent.

Ownership, can be defined as processes where local stakeholders take control and responsibility for the design, implementation, and monitoring of an activity. This 'sense of ownership' is especially crucial to the sustainability of development activities. A development initiative will not be sustained without local 'owners' who continue to be responsible for it after external assistance ends. Normally, 'local' refers to developing country organisations and communities. However, there are also regional or international initiatives where another definition of 'local' applies. Here, actors that would not be owners in a developing country activity, such as a donor, could be an owner. Given the complexity of development processes, the trend towards networked approaches and multi-stakeholder co-ownership are important and complicating elements.

Ownership is therefore something local, of and for the local stakeholders. External stakeholders, as partners, may be given roles in these local activities, but these do not imply that they can also take ownership, which implies control.

Ownership challenges

Much of the workshop discussions sought to deepen our understanding of ownership in an ICT context.

Particularly important was the notion that ownership is something that is taken, not given. This requires that prospective owners are involved in the process from the start. This participation is crucial. Trying to design activities for someone else to take charge of, especially without their involvement, is unlikely to have sustainable results.

As one participant argued, there are three ways to own a development activity: The first is to create a new activity, the second is to transfer ownership of an existing activity, and the third is to (re)claim ownership of an existing activity. Since most development projects still originate among donors and the agencies that work with them, they still tend to be the primary owners of such activities. This is not the best path to sustainability. To minimize difficulties in transferring ownership of an activity, or to avoid them altogether, stakeholder communities themselves need to drive the *creation* process from the beginning.

Following this logic, instead of starting with the design and formulation of an activity, we could start by strengthening local creative 'communities' – either before the project creation process starts – or as part of an inception phase. This has significant implications.

First, end-user communities (from villages down to ministries) need to go through processes of transformation and capacity building (including soft skills in finance, management and communication) to make them truly creative communities; to make them the drivers and owners, instead of mere passengers, in the project creation process.

Second, external actors that traditionally lead design and formulation phases need to limit their direct roles and responsibilities and, as far as possible, encourage local stakeholders to participate and take the lead. This is not as simple as it sounds. It is not enough to 'give' ownership. The local stakeholders need to be empowered so they can take it.

Another key issue is who the owners are. It is clear in a developing country situation that many local actors of various types can legitimately claim to have an interest and stake in a new activity. 'Stakeholder management' helps to ensure that communication among the various parties is effective, that participation is open and transparent, and that potential conflicts are resolved.

Getting the ownership right is essential if the various implementing agencies are to work well together. As critical, the perspectives of the end-users (beneficiaries) also need to be addressed. Activity owners are often more accountable to their foreign donors than they are to the local communities they are supposed to be working with.

It is important to know who the end-users and beneficiaries are, and what roles they may need to play. As in any market, when the beneficiaries are the clients or customers of an information product or service, it makes sense to find out as much as possible about their needs and demands before proceeding too far. While this helps to make the 'offer' more relevant, there may not need to be much ownership by the customer of the product or service. However, where the objective is more empowering in the sense that end-users will participate in the actual creation, delivery and sustenance of a new product, then it is critical that they take ownership from the beginning. Their livelihoods may be at stake. How exactly this is done can vary according to the local situation.

Country gateways case

Country Gateways are locally owned and managed public-private partnerships, designed to facilitate and catalyse the use of ICTs for development. Each is an independent entity. Each also represents the country dimension of the Development Gateway. To ensure sustainability, it is of extreme importance that the local partners are empowered and feel ownership of their country projects. It is also important to devise ways to work with all kinds of local organisations as well as with the donor community. While various approaches have been tried, experience shows that an internal governance structure needs to establish a clear system of checks and balances and must not allow for the disenfranchisement of stakeholders. Furthermore, defining contributions to be made by different stakeholders (finance or in kind) has helped to identify which organisations are clearly willing to take ownership in a Country Gateway.

Ghana networking case

In 2001, IICD convened a meeting with some of its country partners to explore ways to enhance country learning and knowledge sharing about ICTs in development. By 2002, agreements to support local networking efforts were in place in several countries. Support was provided through established IICD contracts. In Ghana, two agencies were contracted and they 'delivered' results as specified. However, local ownership of the networking was still far off.

In late 2002 therefore, IICD provided funds for a group of local actors to get together to formulate their own 'business plan' for country-level networking. In 2003, the contracts were replaced by an MOU in which both parties set out their shared vision and in which IICD committed itself to support a set of locally formulated and owned activities.

The formulation and design of a new activity must involve end-users (not just the intermediaries). They usually see things quite differently and have different incentives and motivations. For example, according to one researcher, farmers frequently ascribe ownership of a project to a prominent individual or organisation. Any negative perceptions of this individual, whether justified or not, can hold back end-user ownership of the whole activity. If end-user ownership is indeed important, then ways must be found to also involve them in the choice of project owners.

Some people argue that donors and other external agencies can also claim some ownership – and thus control – over an activity. This is because they also have responsibilities, to be financially accountable, for example. The problem here is that strong external organisations can easily exert too much control and ownership, weakening the sustainability of the activity through interference or by fostering over-dependence on the external 'owner.' As many in the workshop argued, contributing funds does not entitle the giver to ownership. In general, external agencies should not become owners. Instead, they should look to partnerships as a way to build trusting relations with the local owners, counting on them to contribute to any commitments of the external partner.

Of course, as one donor representative argued, people in donor agencies also take pride in 'their' projects, nurturing and defending them in various ways. In this sense, they also take on a certain kind of ownership. While they often play crucial political roles, especially in project approval and evaluation phases, ownership by these champions is ultimately less important to local sustainability than is a local sense of ownership.

Participatory design and effective stakeholder analysis as part of project design are ways to ensure that each stakeholder can take appropriate types and levels of ownership (responsibilities as well as rights).

Beyond these points, some other factors also correlate with ownership. The nature and quality of the partners' relationship is critical (see below). Haste, especially in cultures where taking time is valued or where relationships need to be cultivated over longer periods, can be negative. This is especially when activity 'milestones,' for example, follow an external timetable. Image is also important. If an activity is perceived as belonging to a certain interest group, then other stakeholders may choose not to become engaged.

Ownership is not automatic, nor linear, in the sense that actors move smoothly from participation through some clear series of steps to ownership. Ownership is built over time, as the actor grows in capacities, understanding and commitment. Depending how an activity evolves, owners at the start may not be owners at the end; and new owners may join along the way.

Each activity therefore needs spaces or mechanisms where owners can meet, engage in dialogue, where they can become 'decision-owners', and where roles and responsibilities are reviewed, and, if needed, adapted to evolving situations.

Our 'ownership challenge' is to ensure that ICT-enabled development activities are developed so that appropriate local ownership is built and enhanced from the very beginning.



This forces us to re-think who leads local project creation processes, who *should* lead them, and what capacities they need to do this effectively. It also means ensuring that all potential owners have been able to participate, that effective mechanisms exist for such ownership to be exercised, and that external actors are not in control. Finally, external parties often play a useful neutral or independent convening role in multi-stakeholder ownership-building processes. It is vital however for these processes to also be locally owned.

India village knowledge centres case

For several years, the M.S. Swaminathan Foundation has supported the use of ICTs in the state of Pondicherry. Ownership issues arise at various levels. In one village, some husbands were not happy that their wives were volunteering in the village knowledge centres. Local cultural norms were challenged and the husbands did not see the benefits. The Foundation overcame resistance by encouraging the husbands to take ownership of the project – by including participation incentives for all the family members, by sharing experiences from elsewhere, by mobilising influential figures in the village.

At a different level, when the Foundation's funding for the project was coming to an end, there was a question of how to continue the village work. The idea was for the villages to take over all responsibility for the knowledge centres. Three approaches were followed – the Foundation provided clear information to the villages on options and potential financing models, the Foundation researched different handover models before the project ended, and the communities devised their own solutions.

In summary, we need to transform the situation where many ICT-enabled development activities are initially formulated and owned by external agencies, often with a few local stakeholders, and where a priority is to transfer or mainstream ownership. Instead, clusters of local actors and communities could be mobilised and encouraged to drive and own the processes in which ICT activities are designed and created, from the start.

Importance of partnerships

External agencies can support these local processes of creation and ownership by engaging in partnership. As part of a shift away from 'development aid' towards more reciprocal 'international cooperation', partnerships are guided by a sense of shared purpose, common values and mutual trust. They are also seen as part of a broader 'learning process' approach to development, in which communities increase their own understanding and capacities, relying less on project 'blueprints' developed elsewhere.

Like ownership, building these reciprocal partnerships is tricky, and fragile relationships can easily be damaged or broken.

Discussions of partnership in the workshop ranged across potential principles, actual experiences, lessons learned, and guidelines.

Since the act of transferring funds does not strictly speaking require any kind of partnership, the importance of common ground and mutual interests

between the parties was emphasised. Without them, why bother with partnership? As well as working towards similar goals, partnerships particularly contribute to processes of learning by both partners.

It was noted that the relations between the partners were always likely to be unbalanced. Nevertheless, governance mechanisms can be developed to help counter these imbalances. The responsibilities of each partner, especially in decision-making, need to be clearly set out and made equal where possible.

One-way conditions or burdens imposed by one party on the other need to be avoided and replaced with reciprocal responsibilities. Important tasks of the partnership, like planning, review, and evaluation, can be undertaken jointly and inform the decisions of both partners. It is important that the partners share failures and mistakes as well as successes.

Since not all partners have the same resources, different types of contributions by each partner need to be valued. This helps to avoid the notion that some partners are more 'senior' or 'junior' or more important than others. Aiming for equality requires a commitment by the partners to openness, transparency, and effective information sharing – on both the positive and the negative elements.

Partnership needs to be taken seriously during the formulation and execution phases. Both sides need to explicitly agree their rights and responsibilities, and ensure that commitments are followed. Partnerships often break down when one party feels that the other is not meeting its side of the bargain. While this can be due to wider policy differences or poor communication, it is often linked with 'details' concerning, for instance, monitoring, reports, or financial accountability. Once commitments have been made, they need to be followed – or re-negotiated!

Moreover, as with ownership, it must be recognised that partnerships take time to build and grow, often emerging from less ambitious collaborations in which

Uganda education case

A university found itself in trouble after the Government was not willing to finance the second and subsequent years of an ICT project that was donor funded in year one. In this situation where the necessary broader local ownership appeared not to have been mobilised, possible solutions included: advocating for government support; seeking additional champions in government; and 'selling' the products to other partners. Project design could also have been different – for example spreading the donor funds over more years might have made it easier for the government to provide funds.

Zambia partnerships case

The experiences of two organisations showed the kinds of partnership issues that can arise. In both cases, donor agencies terminated their support to local organisations, on the basis that capacities had been built and projects completed. In both cases, the organisations felt they were unlikely to be able to maintain the projects.

Solutions would be to include realistic planning for the period after the project as part of the project agreement or partnership. This could include providing support, for instance, to skills such as business planning, audience surveys, fund raising, etc. that would better position the local organisation for the post-project situation.

trust and understanding is developed. On the developing country side, the capacity to negotiate terms of partnership is essential and often under-estimated.

In a general sense, multiple partners or partnership networks seem to work better than exclusive partnerships. Local partners tend to get into financial problems when exclusive partnerships with donors suddenly end. On the other hand, too many partners can dilute the role of end-users in the creative process.

Our 'partnership challenge' is to ensure that our partnerships are fully 'ownership-friendly.'

This means that partnerships should not undermine local ownership. It means making sure that they emphasise reciprocity, that they balance power and other inequalities in the relationship, and that they provide spaces for the partners to engage in dialogue.

ICT specificities?

As the workshop progressed, it became clear that many of the issues discussed also seem to apply to other spheres of development cooperation. Were there then any particular dimensions or aspects that could be associated with information and communication technologies themselves?

Drawing from the different ideas generated by the participants, the following are some specific aspects of ICTs that seem to influence their sustainable application in development:

- *Expectations* – project designers are often so excited by the technological opportunities that they set their expectations too high and can lose sight of the real potentials. The tremendous potential of ICTs means that many people see them to be an end – or a panacea - in themselves.

- *Dependence* – as a new field, many developing countries lack expertise in many aspects of ICTs; this can lead to dependence on foreign inputs in which local ownership may be weakened.
- *Skills* – it was observed that while technologies may leapfrog, people don't. Especially in this area, the local skills base is essential. It is not just technical skills. As most ICT experts are relatively young, many lack some 'soft' political or people skills usually built up over time. In general, the new competencies required to harness ICTs are complex and far away from traditional skills in other areas.
- *Transparency* – the use of ICTs often fosters greater openness and transparency and challenges established hierarchy and systems of control. It often leads to changes in the rules of information-sharing and power relations. This can cause resistance among some stakeholders.
- *Failure* – in a field where technologies are new and business models untried, the risks of failing are high. More generally, ICTs are often tools for institutional change, which itself is complex and risky.
- *Pace* – in this area, the fast speed of technological development and change poses challenges for decision making. In such dynamic situations, levels of ownership and partnership need to also be dynamic and flexible.
- *Understanding* – for many people, ICTs, information and knowledge are difficult to grasp and the benefits are not tangible and hence difficult to define and measure. Often the consequences of choices made are large.

Tanzania telecentre case

This example concerns a community telecentre established with international support, backstopped by a parastatal research organisation, and enjoying solid community support. The telecentre has many owners. However, while the international donors want to hand management and financing over to the local actors, the local stakeholders are in less of a hurry. The challenge is to find new ownership and financing mechanisms for the project.

It was suggested that the finance and content dimensions be separated since each has its own stakeholders. New governance and management mechanisms could then be introduced for each dimension, allowing for participation by stakeholders.

- *Virtuality* – ICTs are not place and time dependent, hence they offer many new ways to address local development challenges.
- *Crosscutting* – the impacts of ICTs cut across sectors and institutional boundaries. To properly harness the possibilities, multi-stakeholder involvement and ownership is crucial.
- *Consumption* – unlike other finite resources, the process of giving or sharing information grows the resource instead of depleting it.
- *Model* – traditional development activities produce things for other people to use and consume. In ICT-enabled development, the consumers are empowered to also become the producers, for themselves and for others.

Conclusions

Where does this lead us? At the workshop end, it was argued that many ICT-enabled development initiatives are not sufficiently ownership friendly.

Bolivia networking case

Similar to Ghana, IICD provides support to local networking in Bolivia. A major challenge is the limited uptake and ownership by participants in the ICT4D network that was set up for them. How could the members be energised to more actively participate and take ownership?

Lessons shared, mainly from Uganda, suggest that the overall aim should be to stimulate joint ownership. This could include: building on what already exists (and has ownership); avoiding major launches where potential stakeholders may sense the programme is already defined and hence hold back; organisers keeping a low profile allowing others to come forward; providing incentives to participate - interesting and relevant content, skills development opportunities; share the responsibilities by decentralising specialised roles; taking time to get to know stakeholders to avoid locking in too early; getting networking skills into the network; and organising many low cost events based around in kind contributions where each is a collaboration and joint venture.

More generally, participation and ownership is enhanced when creation is not forced, when the network evolves over time, and when the agenda is neither dictated by external actors nor from the centre.

There seems to be a gap between discourse and action. Partly this is because we work with multiple stakeholders and don't yet have suitable language and ways to value different contributions.

We don't have effective ways to establish partnerships with the necessary checks and balances and mechanisms to ensure that they respond to the needs of both sides. Vital relationships – among stakeholders, and among partners – need attention.

Moving forward means focusing on processes of building ownership via multi-stakeholder partnerships. As important, we need to invest in ways to make such 'multi-stakeholdership' effective and ownership-friendly.

Becoming ownership-friendly

First and foremost, the importance of ownership needs to be recognised from the start. Addressing ownership questions clearly and openly gives all stakeholders an opportunity to express and understand their individual roles, responsibilities, and expectations. It provides a framework for involvement, allowing the stakeholders to manage their relationships, and to press for appropriate checks and balances. Moreover, ownership-friendliness can be used to measure and assess partnerships.

Some principles . . .

When formulating and designing interventions:

- Support creative communities that initiate and drive processes, negotiate responsibilities, learn as they go, and are dynamic and inclusive;
- Make sure that the demands of all stakeholders can be heard;
- Enhance the management of stakeholder roles and relationships in and around an activity;
- Adapt cooperation and partnership instruments to value reciprocity and shared commitments;
- Provide spaces where ownership and partnership can be negotiated and developed;
- Foster capacities in local communities and organisations to create and drive such activities.

. . . and guidelines

- Involve end-users from the beginning - understand who the end users are, their incentives and motivations, and their demands;
- Create spaces for participation where stakeholders can express their demands;
- Make relationships equal, valuing all inputs and contributions, not just finance;

- Take time in formulation – to build relationships, to develop the human glue and chemistry;
- When building a partnership, do things together – anything – to get trust and understanding, including eating, drinking, and dancing together, and experiencing some painful events together;
- Specify what you want to own – clarify interests, expectations and goals;
- Every case is different and context specific – don't follow standard approaches or solutions;
- Focus on social processes not technology - include socio-economic people in teams formulating ICT projects;
- Innovation comes out of failure – learning within and across activities is vital;
- Negotiate partnerships and build capacities to do this.

Readings

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The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) assists developing countries to realise locally owned sustainable development by harnessing the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). IICD realises its mission through two strategic approaches. First, Country Programmes bring local organisations together and help them to formulate and execute ICT-supported development policies and projects. The approach aims to strengthen local institutional capacities to develop and manage Country Programmes, which are currently being implemented in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Ghana, Jamaica, Mali, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Second, Thematic Networking link country and international partners working in similar areas, connecting local knowledge with global knowledge and promoting South-South and South-North exchanges. Thematic Networking focuses on sectors like education, health, governance, environment, livelihood opportunities - especially agriculture - and overarching issues such as training and evaluation. These efforts are supported by various information and communication activities provided by IICD or its partners. IICD is an independent non-profit foundation, established by the Netherlands Ministry for Development Cooperation in 1997. Its core funders include the Dutch Directorate-General for Development Cooperation (DGIS), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

This brief reports from the ICT Strategy Dialogue organised by IICD in May 2003. It provides a short synthesis of the issues discussed. Additional background materials are available from IICD. Thanks to Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay and Russell Southwood for the workshop facilitation and synthesis on which this brief draws. Comments and inputs by Bas Kotterink, Bénédicte Marcilly, and Annemiek van Schie are gratefully acknowledged. Peter Ballantyne can be contacted at pballantyne@inasp.info.

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