

Deconstructing local ownership of security sector reform: A review of the literature

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Introduction

Since the late 1990s the concept of security sector reform (SSR) has entered the repertoire of international development aid as a means to good governance, democratisation, development and conflict transformation (Brzoska 2003). SSR is understood to be a comprehensive reform process with the aim of making the institutions that are responsible for protecting society more accountable to individual citizens and communities and more responsive to their security needs, while ensuring that they become or remain effective and efficient in the provision of security (Caparini 2004a:181).

SSR differs from traditional forms of military and internal security assistance in a number of important ways. First, reform of the security sector is intended not simply to enhance the

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efficacy of the security forces, but also to ensure that they conform to standards of legality, transparency and accountability. Second, and reflecting this normative impulse, SSR seeks to adopt a holistic approach, recognising that effective reform of security institutions needs to encompass the different components of the security sector in an integrated fashion. Third, the concern of SSR is to have a positive impact not only on the security of the state, but also on the safety of communities and individuals. It is thus predicated on the security needs of the relevant states and communities, and not, as was frequently the case with traditional forms of military and police assistance, on the perceived security interests of external donors, and accordingly the emphasis is on participation and local ownership. Local ownership, indeed, is an article of faith for international development agencies whose agenda is increasingly influenced by the perceived development-security nexus (DFID 2005).

But what does ‘local ownership’ of SSR mean and for what is it good? Is there a consensus on what local ownership entails, or is it simply a convenient label covering everything from wide societal participation in policy formulation and implementation to passive acceptance of externally driven policy reforms? Who are the ‘locals’ who ‘own’ SSR programmes? Is it indeed a contradiction to speak of local ownership in the context of SSR funded by external donors? These are the questions this paper seeks to address on the basis of a review of the existing literature. Here the first paradox can be noted: although the notion of local ownership has gained very wide currency in the context of development aid, there are relatively few studies dealing with the concept and practice of local ownership (Saxby 2003) and still fewer dealing with local ownership in the context of SSR. We therefore draw on both general literature in which the applicability of, and need for, local ownership in the context of development aid programmes are discussed, as well as on the narrower field of SSR.

First the meanings attached to ‘ownership’ and the qualifying adjective, ‘local’, in the development–SSR discourse are reviewed, and the question is asked what purpose local ownership is intended to serve. Then proposals for putting local ownership of SSR into practice are looked at. In conclusion, the finding is that development donors have no consistent definition of local ownership and that in practice, local ownership of externally supported SSR tends to conform to the lowest common denominator. Nevertheless, it makes sense to retain the concept in order to hold donors accountable to their self-proclaimed principles and to serve as a yardstick for measuring the degree of democratic participation in SSR.

What is ownership, who is local, for what is local ownership good?

In everyday parlance, ‘ownership’ is defined as ‘the state or fact of being owner’, the ‘legal right of possession’ (Collins), ‘the state, relation, or fact of being an owner’, ‘lawful claim or

title', 'property, proprietorship, or dominion' (Webster's), '[t]he fact or state of being an owner; legal right of possession; property, proprietorship, dominion' (OED). In a distinction harking back to the categories of Roman law, ownership can be distinguished from possession. The former can thus also be called 'legal possession' and the latter 'actual possession' (OED). Put simply, the possessor may enjoy the fruits of possession, while the owner, who enjoys legal title over the property, may also freely dispose of what is owned. In accordance with standard definitions of ownership, then, policy ownership would imply the ability to modify, amend and withdraw specific policy measures freely and without constraint.

However, local ownership of SSR, indeed of externally funded reform programmes more generally, entails far less than this. For some authors, 'local ownership' is given if and as long as the recipient country is appreciative of the benefits of policy measures. This is the view taken by Boughton and Mourmouras (2003:3), who in a general discussion on local ownership without specific reference to SSR, argue that local actors need not have been involved in the development of reform programmes, let alone be the initiators, in order to qualify as 'owners': 'For a government to own a set of policies does not require that officials think up the policies by themselves, nor that the policies be independent of conditionality. What it does require is for the owner to appreciate the benefits of the policies and to accept responsibility for them.' This comes close to suggesting that gratitude and obedience constitute ownership.

From a recipient perspective, ownership implies a good deal more than appreciation of externally devised programmes. Edomwonyi (2003:43) argues that true ownership would mean that reform efforts are 'locally conceived of and led'. The Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC 2005:34) adopts a position quite close to this broad understanding of ownership in calling for donors and other external actors –

... to orient their assistance to supporting local stakeholders as they move down a path of reform, rather than leading them down it ... it is important that solutions to problems are developed locally and appropriate to the context they are implemented in. Giving primary responsibility to the government and other local stakeholders is essential to locally-owned SSR.

This definition emphasises that the role of external actors is to support locally generated SSR projects rather than to initiate reform of the security sector; it also underlines the importance of a context sensitive approach that can best be achieved where local solutions to security challenges are developed and implemented. Individual OECD member states, however, apply a very restricted definition of local ownership that comes closer to simply winning acquiescence for externally generated policies. Attaching conditions to the provision of development assistance ('conditionality') – standard practice for international financial institutions as well as many donor governments – can be seen as antithetical to

the principle of local ownership, at least where this is defined in a broad sense (Choritz 2002:11). Where ownership is understood to mean no more than acquiescence, however, conditionality is seen to affect 'the degree of ownership', but not fundamentally to challenge the principle of ownership (Boughton & Mourmouras 2003:9). Here a second paradox becomes apparent: the principle of local ownership, that apparently seeks to enhance the decision-making power of recipients, has been enunciated above all by donor governments and institutions, while practitioners and analysts from countries that are commonly the recipients of development aid and SSR programmes have often shown a considerable degree of scepticism towards the concept.

What of the qualifier 'local'? The term local owners is broadly employed to refer to actors and institutions in the recipient countries, and it is often used interchangeably with related concepts such as 'country ownership' (OECD DAC 2005:13, 34–35), 'national ownership' (UN Security Council 2007; Choritz 2002:5; Nathan 2007a:22), 'government ownership' (Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Program 2003:5), 'domestic ownership' (OECD DAC 2005:13), and 'borrower ownership' (Johnson & Wasty 1993). Local in this context refers to actors and institutions within the recipient country, often apparently conceived to be united in goals and purpose. This homogenising view from the distant perspective of the donors is questioned by analysts who draw attention to conflicting needs and interests on the ground that defy the homogenising tendency (Lavergne 2003; Ebo 2007a:83). In this regard, Ebo argues that the concept of local ownership needs to be deconstructed 'to expose the multiplicity of local actors, interests and levels of capacity, authority and autonomy'. Recognition of the conflicting interests of local actors implicitly requires that some mechanism be devised to enable these interests to be voiced and, as far as possible, some kind of consensus on the ends and means of policy reform to be achieved. We return to this point below.

The donor emphasis on country / national / government ownership raises a further question. It suggests a sensibility for sovereign control of national policy, a concern that may seem surprising on the part of foreign donors whose involvement is explicitly intended to impact politics and society in the recipient country. By the same token, it tends to take insufficient account of more complex views of who or what is local. Diaspora communities have long been recognised as central actors in conflict and their potential impact on policy reform should be included in the equation (see for example Kent 2005:34–35). Regional actors also need to be taken into account, the more so since internal conflict almost always spills over into neighbouring countries that provide refuge for those fleeing conflict, a safe haven for combatants, and often material support to one or more of the warring parties. In post-conflict situations, the consensus sought among local actors should therefore ideally include a sub-regional component (Bryden et al 2005).

For what is local ownership good? Generally, the need for local ownership in SSR processes is justified in much the same terms as are used in other areas of development

assistance. Thus, local ownership is seen as a precondition for the effectiveness of SSR (Scheye & Peake 2005a:240) and as a guarantee for the sustainability of SSR measures (Wulf 2004:16; Nathan 2007a:39–42). Without local ownership, SSR is considered to be ‘inimical to development and democracy: domination and paternalism by external actors generate resentment, resistance and inertia among local actors’ (Nathan 2007a:3). Commitment and responsibility of recipients is seen as being enhanced by local ownership (Boughton & Mourmouras 2003:2; Lavergne 2003). Local ownership as participation confers legitimacy on reform (Caparini 2004b:57), guards against criticism (Williams 2000) and helps rebuild trust in the security sector (Jaye 2006:14).

Other authors define local ownership in strongly normative terms, arguing that people, communities and states have the right to determine matters that will affect their lives: ‘At the root of the normative case for local ownership is the argument that people have a right to determine their own destinies and to be governed by their own governments’ (Lavergne 2003). Nathan (2007a:3) sees local ownership as a matter of respect, hence as inherently valuable regardless of its positive impact on the outcome of SSR processes. However, he also argues that local ownership is a necessary pragmatic prerequisite for a positive outcome on efforts to democratise the security sector, for ‘democracy cannot take root other than by democratic means’.

Not surprisingly, there is thus a close relationship between the declared aim of local ownership and the scope of the concept. If it is seen as necessary to secure compliance and legitimacy, the content of the term can be reduced to recipient acceptance of donor devised reform policies. However, if local ownership is viewed as a necessary element of the democratisation process and a goal in its own right, it will be defined more ambitiously.

Putting local ownership of security sector reform into practice

The brief review of the literature presented above reveals that, despite the currency of the term, there is no real consensus on what ‘local ownership’ means, nor on the ends it is supposed to serve. If this is true in general, local ownership of SSR poses further problems specific to the security sector. First, this sector has traditionally been viewed as the symbol and upholder of the defining element of modern statehood, namely the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. The fact that this monopoly has seldom if ever been achieved in non-Western societies makes the issue of SSR under foreign auspices more, not less, sensitive.

Second, it is often the previous actions of still powerful local actors that make SSR necessary in the first place (Scheye & Peake 2005a:235). By definition security

forces wield power that, while it may be legitimate (as in the case of an army subject to democratic parliamentary control and subservient to a democratically elected government), ultimately depends on the ability to exert lethal force. This applies to state security institutions as much as to non-state armed actors – rebel forces, guerrillas and the like. SSR thus has to contend with powerful armed groups who may have a vested interest in opposing reform. Third, if a precondition for ownership of SSR is the capacity to formulate and evaluate security policy, expertise in this field is often conspicuously lacking among civilians. This lack of capacity is frequently a significant factor enhancing the *de facto* autonomy of military and police forces, even under a democratic regime.

Finally, this problem is exacerbated by the fact that armed and security forces are by their very nature inherently undemocratic: hierarchical in structure, often bound by tradition and forming a separate military caste, unused to public scrutiny. SSR thus involves policy reforms in a highly sensitive area where divergent and powerful actors may have conflicting interests.

How then is local ownership of SSR operationalised? Is local ownership even an operational concept? Boughton and Mourmouras (2003:3) allege that it is not, consisting as it does of a necessarily subjective judgement about the state of mind and degree of internal commitment to reform on the part of local officials that are neither directly observable nor measurable. Moreover, the degree of internal commitment is not a static given, but an attitude that may alter with changing political constellations in the recipient country. Evidently, this assertion that local ownership is not and cannot be an operational concept derives directly from these two authors' very weak definition of local ownership as a willingness to commit to donor policies. In general, the more specific and emphatic the definition of what local ownership means, the more detailed the prescriptions for operationalising the concept.

Evidently, the operationalisation of local ownership depends on who is counted among the owners. The heterogeneity of local actors – and potential owners – points to the complexity of achieving a locally owned process: SSR needs to be acknowledged as an inherently political process, and the conflicting interests within it have to be taken seriously (Nathan 2007a:8). The process of achieving ownership will only succeed if the different local actors with their 'different activities, functions, responsibility and authority in relation to governance' are incorporated into SSR at the various phases. In a broad guide to operationalisation, Nathan (2007a:14) proposes a sequenced SSR with the executive designing and driving the process to make sure that parliament, the judiciary, the armed security institutions and civil society provide inputs and legitimise the process at the respective stages during the legislative process:

SSR cannot be undertaken by the amorphous category of 'local actor' and it cannot be undertaken by civil society organisations, which can support and

lobby for reforms but do not have the authority to implement them. SSR can only be carried out by an executive authority that controls or seeks to control the security services.

Local ownership in this perspective could be measured by the extent of its incorporation of all voices of the society in question, and thus by its level of democratic participation. Williams (2000) argues that this inclusive approach must take full account of local actors and institutions, especially where these do not fit the Western mould:

[Reform must be] both consistent with the indigenous traditions of the African continent and ... supportive of the ongoing attempts by Africans to take control of the political processes of which they are inseparable parts. This begs a series of partnerships with legitimate actors within the recipient countries to ensure that security sector reform succeeds.

Such legitimate actors include guerrilla forces and 'indigenous military organisations that have played a positive role in contributing to the physical security of communities' such as the civilian defence forces in Sierra Leone (the Kamajors) and self-defence units in South Africa. Not all sections of the population will regard the same non-state actors as equally legitimate, so the SSR process must allow both time and space for consensus to be reached.

There seems to be no agreement on the extent to which civil society organisations should be included in the reform process. While there is general recognition of the constructive part they can play, they are often relegated to a mere consultative role, for example by canvassing their views on draft security reviews. Terms such as 'government ownership' (Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Program 2003:5) suggest that civil society organisations do not figure prominently among the local owners, while other scholars make their full participation a measure of the level of local ownership (Ebo 2007b:46). The lack of expertise in security matters is often cited as a reason why civil society organisations have not had much impact on SSR (Hutchful 2003:38), but these actors may be in possession of highly relevant local expertise that is not acknowledged. In Sierra Leone, for example, the report of a regional consultant, which highlighted a locally induced process of decision making, was ignored. As a result civil society groups which were very active in the Sierra Leonean peace process were marginalised (Chanaa 2002:66–67).

In the case of Liberia, there is general consensus that the international community has failed to respect the principle of local ownership (Ebo 2005:55). In the transition phase, ownership meant the incorporation of the provisional government and the warring parties into SSR. The process was driven by external experts such as the private military company DynCorp and the United Nations Mission in Liberia; even some of the

security agencies themselves were not aware that the private security company Rand Corporation was undertaking a security review (Jaye 2006:13). The restructuring of the army was commissioned by the United States and handed over to private security and military companies (Aboagye & Rupiya 2005:263). Today, both officials and civil society groups voice their concern about a lack of local ownership and call for a 'Liberianising' of the process (Andersen 2006:4–5).

Moreover, the very term 'civil society' conjures up a culturally and historically distinct Western notion, based on a liberal conception that posits a separation between the state and civil society and tends to reduce the latter to non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As some scholars have argued, the reality in many African countries challenges this myopic vision, since civil society forces may be constituted quite differently, often on the basis of kinship, ideas of ethnicity, or forms of association not known and therefore barely visible to Western donor agencies (Obadare 2004:15).

Even where civil society organisations are judged to constitute relevant local owners, their role is sometimes seen as a limited one. Scheye and Peake (2005b:311) suggest that where the focus is on police reform, the local owners are individual citizens together with local government institutions and the police themselves; where the focus is on military reform, the government is the relevant local owner. This approach seems to reflect the development donor understanding of local owners as being those directly affected by policy reform. But ordinary citizens are in fact affected by military institutions, especially where military service is retained or where the military has a role in internal security. It is difficult to justify such a compartmentalised approach from a normative perspective. The participation of citizens and their organisations in all dimensions of SSR should be the goal, the more so since SSR claims to be a holistic project in which reform in one part of the security sector needs to take developments in other parts of the security sector into account. As the South African case shows, consultation with civil society organisations can be of major importance to ensure reform of the military on all levels (Nathan 2007b:96).

For local ownership to be achieved, it seems necessary to refrain from quick fix, ad hoc activities: 'SSR policy needs to give local initiatives the space to develop their own mechanisms for security change' (Chanaa 2002:66). Only then can external actors come in and support the process. Scheye and Peake (2005a:247) advocate a slowing down of SSR processes in order to achieve local ownership. By scaling down expectations, the focus can be on what is practically possible and affordable, instead of chasing after an ideal that can never be achieved (Scheye & Peake (2005a:260). They make clear how far the principle of local ownership extends in a situation where interests of donors and local actors might be in opposition and donors have the last word: 'It may be possible to negotiate a middle ground that privileges local knowledge, traditions, and capacities, and, only when necessary, is tempered by international intercession' (Scheye & Peake 2005a:254–255).

Engaging civil society actors at every step of the process helps to include distinct perspectives on security problems and also serves to build civilian expertise on security matters that is sometimes lacking at the onset of SSR. Donors and Western-based NGOs often see capacity-building as a means of enhancing local ownership (Clingendael et al 2002:9). In the sphere of civilian capacity-building, donors must be sensitive to the role of local actors and groupings that do not conform to the Western, NGO-based model of civil society and hence tend to be overlooked.

Taking local ownership seriously on an operational level would also mean that donor agencies institutionalise it in every step of their bureaucratic procedures; it would require the development of an institutional culture that takes the process of SSR as seriously as the results (Nathan 2007a:50–53). The theoretical commitment to a broad notion of local ownership by donors – as expressed in the OECD DAC’s publications on SSR (2005, 2007) – gives the governments of recipient countries and other relevant actors the chance to hold donors accountable: they can identify the extent to which a donor’s SSR activities comply with the principle of a locally owned SSR process.

Conclusion

The concept of local ownership is central to the international development discourse and through this discourse it has become part of the standard donor vocabulary with regard to SSR. As this article has shown, however, there is no agreement on the precise content of the term. Moreover, donors very frequently fail to adhere even nominally to the principle of local ownership, in practice often apparently preferring to rely on external technical expertise (Liberia is a case in point) and above all seeking a ‘quick fix’ to security problems.

The very different understandings of local ownership encountered in the literature prompt the question: who needs it and why? Donors demand local ownership in order to legitimise donor-driven policy prescriptions and in the hope that some degree of commitment on the part of the recipients will guarantee effectiveness and sustainability. Recipient governments and state apparatuses may demand local ownership in order to enhance their own influence over policymaking or implementation. For non-state actors, the principle of local ownership may be a lever to prise open the closed circle of SSR policymakers. Thus, although the term appears to mean all things to all men (and women), it is interesting to note that it is seldom jettisoned altogether; rather, critics try to breathe new life into it by defining it more inclusively, emphasising the crucial role of non-state actors and the potential contributions to SSR of non-Western institutions that are so frequently overlooked in donor blueprints.

Calling for an enhancement of local ownership and less control for donors is perhaps naïve when one considers that SSR was conceptualised by donors in order to gain access

to security matters in the development and transformation countries (see Brzoska 2003:20). However, the principle of ownership remains a crucial aspect for ensuring that SSR is undertaken in a democratic process in which all actors of society are integrated: 'A democratic and democratising security review and reform process can only emerge from a collective national vision of security that is based on locally generated responses to locally generated questions' (Ebo 2007a:84).

In general, it needs to be said that the term 'ownership' is a misnomer. There are very few cases of comprehensive security sector reform that have been genuinely owned by a broad local constituency: South Africa's reform process is the obvious example (Cawthra 2005). If we conclude by arguing in favour of retaining the concept of ownership, despite the fact that it ill describes current donor practice, this is because it remains an important ideal to which all SSR processes should aspire. Conversely, we suggest that the qualifier 'local' serves only to veil the unclear intentions of external actors. Rather than relying on so amorphous a category, both donors and recipients should clearly state which actors they have in mind and what precise role they are willing to assign to these actors. In this way the concept could serve to highlight the democratic value of any reform by identifying who was part of it and at what stage of the process. It would allow us to identify the sidelining of civil society, marginalised groups or other actors from SSR processes. Such a deconstruction of local ownership would increase the accountability of both donors and recipient governments and give recognition to the fact that local owners are no homogenous group. It is thus necessary to develop mechanisms and strategies that would allow all voices in society to be heard and incorporated and so make SSR an inclusive endeavour. In this way ownership would be enhanced and the character of SSR as a process, not merely an outcome, would be recognised.

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