'Local ownership' shares with other key concepts like 'peace', 'governance', and 'capacity-development' the characteristic of being analytically vague (Saxby 2003:2)

I. **Arguments in Favour of 'Local Ownership'**.

A variety of arguments tends to be advanced to underline the importance of local ownership. Some of these consider local ownership an intrinsic value. In this view allowing local ownership of peacebuilding efforts indicates proper respect for

- ➢ The *dignity and confidence of people* of a troubled society, and for their ability to tackle difficult situations and find workable solutions;
- ➢ The *sovereignty of that society* (not just the political elite) to decide how it manages its own affairs.

Other arguments are in favour of local ownership for more instrumental reasons. Local ownership of peacebuilding efforts leads to

- ➢ *Greater efficiency* as the buy-in by the various local actors generates smoother cooperation, and greater effectiveness because the solutions pursued have come from within and are more appropriate to the specific conditions to which they are expected to apply;
- ➢ *Greater sustainability* of the action and its results in the medium to longer term because the commitment to the action and the results is not dependent on the presence and dominant financial support of external actors. In the context of peacebuilding this also tends to be expressed in terms that external actors can stop the violence but cannot 'make peace'. That ultimately is something that only those at conflict with each other can do.

"*No one can make anyone else's peace. People and societies must create the conditions and develop the processes for achieving and sustaining their own peace. Peace practitioners can support these processes, work alongside people as colleagues, offer different perspectives and ideas, and discuss options. But they cannot make peace in another person's context. If the solutions do not come from the communities affected, they can amount to manipulation or attempted social engineering.*" (Anderson & Olson 2003:32).

"*The underlying philosophy assumes that peace is a process that must involve the entire society toward transforming attitudes of members of the conflicting parties and society towards each other. It is not a condition that can be achieved by signing agreements between conflicting parties at conference tables. The (…) peacebuilding concept is based on the conviction that sustainable peace can only be built from with, by the people themselves, drawing upon their own resources, within the context of their own culture and tradition. The concept further underlines that this is a long-term process that can only be made sustainable by the people themselves.*" (Svensson 2001: 291)

Some indicators of local ownership

The central attention point is who takes the key decisions?

- Who defines the problem?
- Who sets the agenda and the priorities?
- Who convenes?
- Who manages the trajectory, rhythm and time of the intervention?
- Whose are the results of a process?
- How do people, especially those close to a process, talk about it – especially in informal and unofficial settings? Do they refer to it as 'our process', 'our programme', 'our institution', 'our results' …?
- Do people continue a process even if an external supporting agent is not present? (short of e.g. financial means making it impossible to continue).
- Do people support the implementation of decisions taken?

What other indicators might there be? Are there very context-specific indicators?

II. Cautionary Tales about 'Local Ownership'.

Contrary to the above assertions, others have argued that 'local ownership' is a high risk strategy. Two reasons are most frequently invoked:

a. *Lack of capacities*: Allowing too much local ownership too early on entails a high probability that a society will fall back into its known patterns which have been a major cause of its violent dysfunction. In general, local actors simply may not have the governance capacities (which is seen as a mix of the political and technical) to assume full 'local ownership'.

b. *Self-interest*: A too hands-of approach risks that the various peace and recovery efforts get captured by specific individuals or interest groups, for their own political benefit and/or for private gain (corruption). 'Local ownership' then reinforces the divisions and antagonisms.

These are very valid concerns grounded in experiences. Yet they cannot constitute an argument for external actor dominance. There are definitely serious challenges related to local ownership, but

the historical experience has also demonstrated "*the greater problems associated with a lack of local ownership.*" (Nathan 2007:8).

 "*The emphasis on national ownership does not assume that internal actors will necessarily develop better policies than external actors. Experience shows however that external domination generates resentment, inertia and resistance, and that externally driven development is unsustainable. Internal actors grasp the complexities and needs of their society better than outsiders, a fact that makes national ownership of peacebuilding processes an imperative.*" (WSP & IPA 2004:2)

Local Ownership: Who Needs it and Why?

"*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 legitimize 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 policy making or implementation. For non-state actors, the principle of local ownership may be a lever to prise open the closed circle of (SSR) policy makers.*

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, emphasizing 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."

Bendix & Stanley 2008

III. Who 'Owns'?

Admitting that local ownership is relevant and needs to be stimulated, which shouldn't mean providing a blank check, the question then becomes who is or are the local owner(s)?

Not infrequently one finds external actors argue that there is 'national ownership', based on the fact that the national government has endorsed it. Such view is often contested by other 'local' actors, and not only a political opposition, who feel they have been excluded from decision-making processes with major consequences for the society. Such contestations are important because they concern the perceived legitimacy of the policy and decision making process: small policy circles of international and national government actors taking major decisions may not increase citizen's trust that this is 'their' government and give the impression, rightly or wrongly, that it are really the external actors that are driving the agenda. While this may not seem a big obstacle for the policy and decision-making process, the implications become clearer in the implementation phase. Indeed, if there is no broader social and political support then implementation will stall in the face of indifference, passive resistance and active rejection.

If a critical element of 'good governance' lies in the relationship between leaders and populations, then small and exclusive policy circles do not contribute to social cohesion and effective societal mechanisms for public debate, negotiation and bargaining. In short, there is much to be gained from larger 'societal ownership'.

IV. Public Consultation, Public Participation and Public Acceptance.

Broad social and political support for a course of action is important:

- It legitimizes decisions that affect society at large;

- It creates support for the implementation of those decisions, reduces resistance and thereby lowers the transaction costs of implementation;

- In the long-term encourages and maintains social and political cohesion.

a.   Public consultations**.**

Public consultations are useful to get a feel for a spectrum of opinions and preferences, but are not good enough as a basis for collective decision-making. First of all, people's opinions on critical issues for the society at large are not necessarily based on sufficient information. Public consultations as such do not have a process in which ideas are publicly debated and tested on their merits. Secondly, it is quite common to see public consultation processes breed indifference and cynicism rather than the social and political support that they claimed to seek. Frequent reasons for this are that people consulted realise that the consultations are tokenistic: they come late in a process, may take place when a decision is already taken, do not offer the relevant information that would allow people to come to a more informed opinion, and do not really take serious views that differ from those already popular in elite circles. Public consultations do not necessarily generate 'broad ownership', often they do the contrary.

A more structured form of doing 'public consultations' are public opinion polls. They register the spectrum of opinions and the relative weight of different opinions. But they say nothing about how public opinions are formed. Public opinion polls have sometimes played a role in peace processes. In the Northern Ireland peace process for example, public opinion polls (the questions of which were designed and agreed by all the parties) played an important role in signaling to the leadership that the general public was ready for compromises (see Irwin 2001). This gave the political leaders the assurance of enough public backing to move towards what ultimately became the Stormont Agreement. Yet if public opinion is lagging behind the views of the leadership, public opinion polls can do precisely the opposite. In a referendum (which is a form of public opinion poll) the Greek Cypriots in 1994 rejected the Annan Plan to resolve the 'frozen conflict' in Cyprus.

b.   Public participation.

Genuine public participation requires a process different from 'public consultations'.

First it requires 'safe spaces'. People need to be able to genuinely express diverse opinions, without fear of retaliation. This holds also for those who may have more radical or extreme views. Such spaces may not always exist, and their creation and protection may require some skillful political management. If there is fear about 'freedom of expression', not everyone will express their views.

Secondly, it requires a reduction of asymmetries. Asymmetries exist between people in self-confidence, knowledge about a topic, social status and even simply the (social and economic) ability to participate. If these asymmetries – and inequalities- are not reduced by the process, they are likely to get confirmed in the public arena. Multiple approaches may be needed to reduce such asymmetries. It may be necessary to work separately first with specific sub-groups to develop their confidence and knowledge of issue, but also to develop a position on an issue. Skillful facilitation will also be required of the public arena in which diverse groups then meet.

Thirdly, public participation is likely to start with debate. Public debates are important because that is where different views and opinions can be aired. But they do not by themselves encourage convergence, as those expressing a particular view seek supporters for their view, without necessarily listening seriously to alternative views. A public debate can also remain negative: it can be an opportunity for people to vent their anger, frustration and criticism without going any further. Debates therefore have to evolve to more difficult but also potentially more transformative dialogue. That requires more than a one-off event – it requires a sustained engagement of at least a number of the participants. It also requires skillful facilitation to move people beyond their emotions, politics and personal interests to a broader picture in which different visions and perspectives can be envisaged, and where enough 'convergence' can be found.

If public participation influences the priorities on the national agenda, or how an issue is framed, and if it leads to decisions that are perceived as having taken into account the diversity of views and interest, then these decisions are likely to enjoy a fair amount of legitimacy, and they will find public support for their implementation.

There are two important implications: time and money. Broader public participation requires a process, and processes tend to take longer. Longer processes are also seen as more 'expensive'. The assumption behind the arguments in favour for public participation is that "*a process oriented approach that respects and empowers local actors is more likely to yield good results in the long-term than a product-oriented approach that undermines local actors and is not sustainable.*" (Nathan 2007:7-8). Critically, it also strengthens local and national capacities in society.

A good example is to be found in the Nimba county (Liberia) case study, where prolonged efforts at problem solving with limited ownership did not yield any breakthrough. In the end such breakthrough only came through a process of wider engagement and mobilization of people in Nimba. (JPU-UNOPS 2008).

A key question here is: what is 'good enough' public participation? Should there have been involvement of hundreds of people, of thousands of people, of tens of thousands of people? There are no normative answers to this, and it will vary depending on the specific situation of a society and on the topic at hand. In any case, local actors will be better placed to assess this than external actors.

c.   Public acceptance without participation.

But surely a costly and time-consuming process of public participation cannot be envisaged for every public policy decision, particularly not in a post-violence situation when so many important public policy decisions have to be made so that the resources and energies available are guided by a framework?

There are two dimensions to this question: The first is the need to act in the short-term and sustainability – in terms of broad public support- in the long-term. There are no simple solutions to this, other than recognizing that strengthening the capacities throughout society for public participation in the management of the political community is critical. If such capacities exist, then there are mechanisms in future to revisit critical issues in a more inclusive manner.

The second is that if people gain trust in the institutions (because they are seen as 'legitimate' and functioning) and in the fairness of decision-making processes (in terms of taking into account the diversity of interests and perspectives), the demand for public participation will be less. Such situation however may take many years and will not be arrived at without regular and meaningful public engagement.

The alternatives are simply public indifference, distrust or even resistance. Even public indifference is a problem for governance. That is why we pay attention not only to the outcome of elections but also to voter turnout. Winning elections that saw low voter turnout means a government has less legitimacy.

Some Indicators of Public Participation.

- Quantitative indicators: how many public conversation events were organized; how many people participated and how many times;

- Diversity indicators: where were the public conversation events organized (geographical spread); which sectors of society were present;

- Qualitative indicators: could the diversity of views find equal expression;   did the conversations move beyond positions and emotions to more reasoned reflection of the issues at stake; did the conversations influence the attitudes of the participants; did the conversations influence the opinions of the participants;

- Impact indicators: did the public conversations influence to debate in the smaller policy circles around decision-makers.

What other indicators or proxy indicators can you envisage?

Are there more situation and issue-specific indicators?

V. Is Broad Public Support Possible?

Another argument against the pursuit of 'local ownership' is that there are no homogenous views in any given society, and even less so in divided societies. Among the 'national' actors, there are not only conflicting interests but also different perspectives and proposals. Pretending local ownership therefore may mask "*the multiplicity of local actors, interests and levels of capacity, authority and autonomy*" (Ebo 2007:83 cited in Bendix and Stanley 2008:96).

Proponents of local ownership will admit that is correct – but such observation simply signals the necessity of a social and political process to facilitate convergence if not consensus among the diversity of views. That may not be easy, but then "*free and open contestation of politics and interests is integral to democracy and entirely consistent with local ownership."* (Nathan 2007:9).

They will also argue that broader participation will bring out as yet unrecognized knowledge and wisdom within the society and works against the domination of more extreme views. Diversity, when present on equal footing, favours moderation and compromise.

"*The greater the quality and inclusiveness of the dialogue, the more likely it is that the outcomes will reflect the necessary compromises, address the needs and interests of different constituencies, enjoy popular support and serve the national interest. It should be emphasized that extensive dialogue is not separate from or a substitute for normal political and governance processes. It is an intrinsic part of these processes – often a building-block towards them- and must be designed to strengthen them.*" WSP-IPA 2004:5)

VI. Is Broad Public Support Durable?

A last argument against investments in processes to generate broad public support is that such support can erode and even evaporate as the situation changes. Is this a major problem? Not necessarily, as this is an intrinsic human and social occurrence: people and societies at large need to regularly reconfirm and even renegotiate agreement on important issues. The point is whether it will be national actors that can and will lead the new negotiations to come to a workable agreement that enables renewed collaboration. If that is the case, then the society is developing real capacities for the management of its affairs without recourse to violence. Once again, our attention is drawn to the critical importance of national capacities to manage social and political processes that can generate agreements that have fairly broad social support.

VII. Local Ownership in Internal-External Actor Relationships.

We have rejected a minimalist interpretation that would see 'local ownership' where a national actor accepts and appreciates the policies and programmes offered by the external actor. There is an intrinsic power-relationship between the one that holds the purse strings and the one that wants to receive the money, and certainly internal actors are not in doubt who really calls the shots.

An intermediary position argues that local ownership is desirable and will be obtained once the necessary capacities have been developed that will allow a '*transfer*' of ownership. High local ownership therefore follows after 'capacity-strengthening'. The problem here is that, as the discussion document on capacity-development will signal, capacity-development itself requires a sense of ownership. Without it, the efforts at 'capacity-strengthening' will sink away in feelings of low confidence, humiliation and resentment.

A maximalist interpretation would see local actors have full control: they have the initiative, set the priorities, define the agenda, determine the objectives and time frame, take the decisions, design the intervention and its rhythm, control the budget, assess the results and determine what to do further.

National Actors in the Driving Seat.

A 'National Dialogue, at the highest levels, was initiated in Lebanon in 2008. All and only the main Lebanese political players are present in the National Dialogue. The Dialogue is supported however by a 'Common Space' initiative, which receives external support, in the form of money but also 'technical' facilitation and process expertise. These are reflexions from the process expert on some of the implications of leaving the national actors in the driving seat.

The importance of process – and who decides it:

- The national actors design the process and determine the terms of engagement that they feel comfortable with. This may not be as fast as the external actors would like to see it. It may follow a logic that outside actors may simply not see.
- It will not be a linear process: there will be reversals, even moments of suspension or breakdown. Key is the continued commitment of the national actors to the process, with an eye to agreements that may –for the time being and for quite a while to come- be and remain 'aspirational'.
- In the eyes of the external actors, the process may not be the best. The outcomes may also not be the best. The national actors probably know this. But both the process and the outcomes may be what is currently 'possible'.
- This means that the national actors may have a very different assessment of 'progress' and 'success' or 'failure'. Who monitors and evaluates, whose benchmarks are being used?

continued

Some Risks:

- Actors who matter are not 'included'. This may undermine the legitimacy of the process (internally) and block any implementation of agreements.
- Power concerns: change often implies winners-losers. Who benefits, who stands to lose? To what degree do power concerns jeopardize the integrity of the process.
- Culture of dialogue: there can be a very sophisticated culture of dialogue, which however is the art of bargaining. A culture of bargaining is not the same as a culture of consensus building. It is difficult and will take a long time to change from one to the other.

Attention points:

- Is the time ripe?
- Who is included, who is excluded? Can participation be expanded, ownership get broadened – perhaps not through more direct but already more 'indirect' participation?
- Choice of words, even apparently straightforward words: 'peace', 'actors', 'stakeholders'. Words carry meanings and connotations, and the choice of words can be controversial.
- How is the issue framed – this can be a matter of controversy. How can it be framed so it becomes possible for all to engage with it?
- Building trust – in the process, in the support/facilitation of the process.

External assistance actors.

- We should not be 'peacebuilders' i.e. the primary 'agents' – our role is to provide 'peacebuilding support' to the national actors;
- What can be the nature of that support:
    - Creating a conducive environment: help with difficult issues of inclusion, sequencing of discussions about difficult issues, difficulties about framing the issue; trust building etc.
    - Expanding options: help make local knowledge available and digestible; exposure to other comparative experiences and options
    - Providing a safety net: enable continued commitment to the process or the aspirational agreements, even in times of tensions and even breakdown
    - Enable more distant (and possibly impatient) outsiders to better understand the process among the internal actors and correct their mis-readings of it.

Others argue that, inasmuch as 'external assistance actors' are present, local ownership will hardly ever be total.

"Yet I believe the term local ownership is pretentious, because it covers up the difficulties inherent in asymmetrical power relations and in the mandate given to outsiders to be involved in processes. (…) Taken seriously as a guiding principle for action, local ownership would mean far more than a

*consulting or participatory role given to the local actors on behalf of the donors or external partners. Rather it means that local actors have the final decisive power over a project's process and outcome. Local ownership then means a power shift, which goes far beyond existing practices. Local actors would not only be involved in the information gathering process or strategy development, but should have the means to decide about the agenda, strategy and budget management themselves, even decide who the beneficiaries of the project should be." (*Reich 2006:14-5)

This can and does happen and 'budget support' is a mechanism enabling such high degree of local ownership. And yet, even when there is no micro-management intrusion from the external actor, there still will be periodic reviews and assessments of the overall direction and performance of the recipient of the budget support. The footprint of the external actor may be light – but there is a footprint.

VIII.   Focus on the Relationship.

Some analysts have argued that the rhetorical references to 'local ownership' in a context where external actors are involved, misdirects the attention (e.g. Reich 2006). Especially if transfers of funds are involved, there will always be a certain inequality and asymmetry in the relationship. The debate should not focus on 'local ownership' but the most appropriate roles for each and on the nature and quality of the relationship.

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