Conceptualisation and experience of ownership in multi-stakeholder partnerships: Lessons from the HDECoVA initiative in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Ownership is commonly considered a key principle aiming to promote effective multi-stakeholder partnerships. This article explores the conceptualisation and experience of ownership in a multi-stakeholder initiative in TVET, with an empirical focus on a Public-Private Development Partnership (PPDP) in Ethiopia. The qualitative case study is based on insights derived from semi-structured interviews with project staff and partnership actors and an analysis of relevant documents. The findings indicate discrepancies between rhetoric and reality of ownership dynamics, which complicates the actual ownership practice. The goal of all-inclusive equitable participation, originally intended, is not achieved. Power is not equally shared in the initiative, as local actors play a limited role in the decision-making process, and therefore do not acquire ownership as intended. In this case, the PPDP approach reproduces inequality as international actors exert influence through indirect governance. This study suggests a coherent understanding of the ownership concept, which emphasises the relationship between all parties, promoting co-ownership, rather than merely defining the roles of donors and beneficiaries. PPDPs are likely to achieve better results and local actors may sustain outcomes when their capacity is built through active engagement in the process and the partnership is implemented through joint commitment, responsibility, and equal participation.

Keywords: multi-stakeholder partnership, public-private development partnership, ownership, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), Ethiopia

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, the issue of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs) has become a development mantra and is widely seen as a new form of global governance with the potential to link multilateral norms and local action in tackling sustainability challenges (Bäckstrand, 2006; Biekart & Fowler, 2018). The nature of such constellations goes beyond the partnership of traditional actors, with a significant realignment of roles among a multitude of state and non-state stakeholders from both the global north and south (Beisheim & Liese, 2014). MSPs are considered pivotal to driving development and are rapidly increasing in all areas, including the education sector (Knutsson & Lindberg, 2019; Menashy, 2018).

The rapid change in the partnership landscape following the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005) strongly promotes and formalises the principle of ownership bringing issues of participation, power relations, and organisational agency as key considerations (Black, 2020; Burghart, 2017; Fowler & Biekart, 2013; Menashy, 2018). The notion of ownership has been integrated into several international policies and was reaffirmed in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015) as a guiding principle to promote development cooperation by equipoising the relationships between international and local actors (Fraiser & Whitfield, 2009).

Despite the imperative of emphasising local ownership as a crucial aspect of legitimate development cooperation, ownership remains contesting and ambiguous. Critics contend that partnerships are nothing more than a mask to continue donor dominance and development initiatives are often driven in line with donor priorities (United States Institue of Peace [USIP], 2010). Proponents who advocate the importance of partnerships, highlight the challenges of establishing a genuine partnership based on equality and mutual respect in circumstances, where one party has the purse and the other the begging bowl. Burghart (2017) argues that although actors at the receiving end are better engaged in development projects today, their influence over the partnership implementation process has not paralleled that of donors, who have assumed more power and domination.

Partnership practices under the banner of ownership mirror a mechanism of indirect governance, witnessing that there are apparent differences between ownership rhetoric and practice (De Carvalho et al., 2019; Lie, 2019). In Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) partnership stakeholders who provide financial support frequently exercise a dominant role (Cardini, 2006), which is manifested in the direction given to other partners. Such power imbalance can weaken mutual and reciprocal relationships (Flynn, 2015). As Billett (2011) argues, the provision of TVET programmes' goals, processes, and outcomes are often determined by 'the voice of powerful others'. However, an

inclusive and comprehensive involvement and decision making of actors in the provision of vocational education must be considered.

In the increasingly complex donor-recipient relationship, how different actors experience their own role in a partnership is affected by the inconsistent interpretation of the ownership concept, which makes the concept more problematic. This ultimately makes the coordination, implementation, and management of collaborative endeavours between donors and recipients difficult (Keijzer et al., 2018).

This article explores how multi-stakeholder initiatives capture the essence of ownership through the analysis of a TVET-sector PPDP initiative in Ethiopia. It also analyses whether the PPDP model belongs to local actors, and international partners, or caters to ownership in terms of applying collective agency and co-ownership. Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate how different actors in different landscapes conceptualise ownership, and how these conceptualisations influence international actors' approaches to and local actors' experience of ensuring ownership within the PPDP.

Discourses of partnership-ownership nexus

With the persistent decline in legitimacy of aid-based collaborations following the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness (OECD, 2005), the global community called for alternative approaches to redefine the relationship between benefactors and beneficiaries, with a major focus on ownership and participation of stakeholders in developing countries, to address the prevailing shortcomings in global governance (Black, 2020; Brown, 2017).

Ownership takes a central stage among the five key principles of the Paris Declaration, in which 'partner countries exercise effective leadership over their development policies, and co-ordinate development actions' (OECD, 2005, p. 3). MSPs necessitate the global community to ponder about the centrality of both better participation and decision-making of not only those in the drivers' seat but also disadvantaged actors, and end-users at the local level (Glasbergen et al., 2007).

A comprehensive and genuinely meaningful sense of partnership is founded on a set of values such as trust, accountability, transparency, reciprocity, and respect for the identities of different partners that develop through time, because of mutual development, interdependence, participation, and commitment, to attain collectively agreed-upon goals (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Schaaf, 2015).

Although the practice of partnership for international development continues where ownership has become a buzzword, there is a powerful critique, which refutes ownership principles as not more than rhetoric. In the context of multi actors' engagement, consistent and comprehensive application of shared norms and values are not much more than aspiration (Black, 2020).

Menashy (2018) argues that several partnership initiatives implement certain controlling mechanisms and put a new form of conditionality on local stakeholders, influencing them to commit to donors' principles. In support of this, Knutsson and Lindberg (2019) regard MSPs as 'hegemonic and incomplete education projects' that mystify power asymmetries through the implementation of consensus-oriented initiatives with the intent of diffusing policy priorities of the economically powerful international actors.

Ownership as a contested concept

According to Menashy (2018), the confusion in ownership discourse is one of the major reasons used to conceal and reaffirm the regeneration of the unbalanced North-South relationship in the new development order. Since its inception ownership has often been a contested concept. The understanding of its essential meaning varies among stakeholders and even raises concerns in scholarships (Black, 2020; Fraser & Whitfield, 2009). Policymakers and researchers use the term interchangeably; some examples are 'inclusive ownership', 'democratic ownership', 'community ownership', 'local ownership', or 'national ownership' (Brown, 2017; Hasselskog & Schierenbeck, 2017; Saliba-Couture, 2011).

In some literature, the understanding of ownership is presented with optimism, a means for successful and sustained partnerships, as prescribed in the normative aspiration of the Paris Declaration. Ownership has become a major shared concept guideline and a means for the success and sustainability of development practices across the globe (Brown, 2017). This implies that in transnational MSPs, the concept of ownership suggests the lessening of international actors' dominance in terms of their visions and priorities over the interests of the receiving end. This captures the essence of 'below-governance' and is alleged to enhance the participation and implementation gap in internationally funded partnerships (Lie, 2019). Similarly, Brolin (2017) and Jerve et al. (2008) explain that end-users must take responsibility for managing and implementing their development agenda if the partnership is to sustain. The term ownership denotes recipients' capacity and right to set their development objectives and define their strategies for achieving these objectives (Brolin, 2017).

Söderbaum (2017) perceives ownership as the goal of any development cooperation and criticises the way it is described in the Paris Declaration as a necessary condition for the actualisation of effective collaboration. As he reiterates, the idea of ownership is viewed as a goal or an end by itself in the declaration. Such an unclear understanding of ownership in partnerships is problematic, blurring which dimensions of partnership projects should be owned – implementation processes rather than the ultimate goals or vice versa.

There is also division in the scholarship regarding the concept of ownership as to who should own which dimensions of partnership projects. Brolin (2017), Brown (2017), and Lie (2019) tend to see ownership from the recipients'

perspective. For example, Brolin (2017) provides a broad definition that attributes the concerns of ownership neither to the multi-stakeholder approach nor the donors' side but considers it as a mechanism for balancing the asymmetrical relationship between the donor and the recipient in favour of the latter. There is also a wide understanding of ownership expressed in terms of the right and capacity of locals to define their priorities.

In their dualistic but contradictory view of ownership, Fraser and Whitfield (2009) first conceptualise ownership as partners' commitment to partnership policies, without considering the way policies are formulated and decisions are made. The idea of ownership is also perceived as a degree of control exercised by the recipients over partnership implementation and outcomes. Here, two contradictory conceptualisations of ownership are reflected: 'ownership as conditionality' and 'ownership as autonomy', making the term more unequivocal. Lundin's (2019) multi-actor approach to ownership is viewed as a relational and interactive concept, by which a multitude of actors take the responsibility and joint commitment. In this pragmatic conceptualisation, ownership is considered in relation to every actor's engagement in accordance with their respective potential strength. Keijzer et al. (2018) suggest all-inclusive participation, commitment, and capacity development, as a prerequisite to multi-stakeholder ownership of several aspects of a partnership leading local actors to ultimately take over partnership outcomes.

De Valk et al. (2005), who understand development partnerships as a dynamic practical relationships and interactions, introduce 'co-ownership', which equates to shared ownership, where various actors respect the sovereignty of other actors and re-enforce each other. Their discussions result in a functional approach that demonstrates ownership as a non-exclusive concept, associated with three major distinctions that can be owned across different phases: objectives, substance, and processes. Ownership of objectives is about the extent to which partnership goals are owned by recipients and aligned with local priorities. It also involves why and by whom the partnership was initiated. Material and non-material inputs and outputs are related to what each partner takes to the partnership in terms of resources and technical assistance. It entails who determines partnership outputs and owns them. Ownership relates to the degree of engagement by partners across various stages of the partnership process.

Despite the change in the rules of the game that marks alteration in the structural relationships between the most and least powerful actors in the new partnership landscape, confusion exists concerning what ownership is, characterising it as a problematic concept. In a situation when stakeholders and practitioners interpret ownership differently, its application as an instrument for achieving sustainability is jeopardised (Keijzer et al, 2018) and generates discrepancies between ownership rhetoric and its practical actualisation in MSPs (Lundin, 2019).

The Heavy-Duty Equipment and Commercial Vehicle Training Academy (HDECoVA)

This case study concerns a PPDP project, the HDECoVA, established in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2012. HDECoVA comprises a collaboration between three groups of international partners, a local TVET school, and a government authority. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) is the donor partner, while Volvo, a private multinational company, provides equipment, technology, and expertise with an investment of a minimum of 50 % of the total cost associated with a project (Samsioe, 2013). The United Nations Industry Development Organization (UNIDO) takes on the role of project coordination, implementation, and management. Selam David Rosceli Technical and Vocational College, or SDTVC, a local host educational establishment offers the collaborative TVET programme to underprivileged youths.

The principal objective of the PPDP project is to improve the supply of adequate skills in advanced commercial vehicle maintenance and increase Ethiopia's youth access to productive employment through high-tech training and thereby contributing to poverty reduction in the country (UNIDO, 2012). The project also focuses on addressing the demand for highly skilled mechanics, where the existing TVET programme is of low educational quality and ineffective due to resource constraints and a lack of qualified academic staff.

The novelty of this PPDP model offers an addition to the development partners and a local host institution, instead of the traditional and dualistic Public-Private Partnership or the PPP approach. The PPDP, with an added 'D' for Development, forms another layer of partnership and is useful for the understanding of a development-driven constellation in TVET from a multi-stakeholder perspective (Moll de Alba & Virpi, 2019).

The project establishes the first state-of-the-art TVET academy for heavy-duty equipment technicians in Ethiopia. This academy is intended to provide three to four years of training to its students in a course cycle lasting from level I to IV training qualifications, within the Ethiopian national qualification framework for TVET that has five levels of qualification, from national TVET certificates I to V (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2008). In addition to heavy-duty mechanics training, students undertook courses in soft skills, English language, and Information technology training courses. The active operation of the first phase of the project was delayed for three years as the validation and approval process of the new curricula with the Ministry of education in Ethiopia took substantial time. The academy trained 142 students whereof 29 (20 %) were female. In 2019, the project partners announced the second phase of this project, called 'the Misale Project' that aims to provide a driver education, which is not the focus of this study. As a PPDP project, the HDECoVA academy focuses on developing a pilot model, which can be scaled up and emulated by other TVET institutions in the country.

Samsioe (2013) defines PPDPs as semi- or non-structured partnerships. Non-traditional and traditional partners, public and private sectors, as well as transnational and local actors, make a joint investment in a project implemented by a third, but non-profit party with the main emphasis on development. The objective has a wider development impact of creating conditions for people living in poverty to improve their lives.

Among the factors that differentiate a PPDP model from the traditional PPP approach is its focus on aspects of sustainable development to enhance TVET. As Cerar et al. (2018) state, the PPDP model anticipates and responds fully to SDG 17, which aims to encourage and promote effective public, public-private, and civil society partnerships. These partnerships are used in areas where poverty reduction cannot be achieved by separating private actors, the public sector, and development agencies and where all these actors share a common goal.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, which explores how a PPDP initiative captures the essence of ownership to qualify as a successful partnership model in TVET. The qualitative research methodology is chosen to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issue under investigation. Prior research on how ownership is conceptualised and experienced from local actors' perspectives in MSPs, and more specifically PPDPs, are meagre. The exploratory case study design was appropriate to this study, as it is carried out to gain insight into an existing problem in detail, when little is known about the phenomenon and when a contribution to a limited body of research on the topic is required (Mills et al., 2010).

The fieldwork in this study was conducted over three months, investigating a five-year-long initiative, i.e., the HDECoVA project in Ethiopia. As described in the above section, we selected this project as our case study as an illustrative example of a multi-stakeholder public-private development partnership.

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 research participants representing the main members of the partnership from both international and local actors, including teachers and local company representatives. The subjects were approached to take part in semi-structured interviews through purposive sampling, based on their in-depth knowledge of the initiative and all volunteered to participate (Denscombe, 2010). A summary of participants is presented in table 1 below.

Table 1. Research participants.

Participants	Number of participants
Tripartite international partners	5
Project staff	2

School management	2
School teachers	3
Local government authorities	2
Local companies	4
Total	**18**

The interviews with representatives of UNIDO, VOLVO, and SIDA were carried out via Skype meetings, whereas all the participants from local actors, project staff, and local companies were interviewed face-to-face. The interview guide comprises questions focusing on the way local ownership was conceptualised, experienced, and manifested across the different dimensions of the partnership. The interviews with international actors were carried out in English, those with local actors were held in Amharic and later translated into English. The research participants were asked a series of semi-structured and open-ended questions, amplified by follow-up questions for clarification to provide an opportunity to elaborate on issues in the study and obtain clarifications to secure a better understanding of perspectives. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. Except for one participant, all the interviews were audio-recorded, and data were transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interviews provided depth and comprehensiveness to the collected data (Denscombe, 2010).

As part of the research methodology and design, document analysis has also been employed using document reviews as data collection instrument to help in the supplementation, corroboration, and triangulation of data from the interviews (Silverman, 2007). This was important during the analysis phase, to consider not only the perspectives of research participants but also to understand what was agreed upon or formalised initially and what the project tried to accomplish concerning ownership. The secondary data, in the form of project documents, primarily consisted of project agreements, memoranda of understanding, progress and final project evaluation reports, as well as Learning Knowledge Development Facility (LKDF) documents found within the HDECoVA project management system.

In this study, thematic analysis was used, inspired by Creswell's (2014) framework for coding and organising segments of large data gathered to identify and analyse major themes. This analysis was conducted by reading through notes and transcripts to develop a series of codes, by which the structure of the data was organised into different themes. These themes are organised in a manner to provide detailed insight into various segments of the ownership dimension. They include ownership of objectives, inputs, processes, and outputs, along with issues such as inclusion, commitment, equal participation, and decision making. The general themes emerged at the initial stage of the data setup and were later reorganised into sub-themes after familiarisation with transcripts and better comprehension of the collected data on how actors understand and experience

ownership in the HDECoVA partnership. To ensure the credibility of the results, we employed a method of triangulation across the data by different participants and by combining qualitative interviews and document analysis, which helps in obtaining substantial data about actors' conceptualisation and experience of ownership (Creswell, 2013). Member checking was also employed to validate the responses by sharing the data with the participants (Stake, 1995).

Regarding ethical considerations, as mentioned in Yin (2009, p. 73), 'the study of contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context obligates the researcher to important ethical practices'. Management of risk was considered in terms of confidentiality of respondents, by keeping them anonymous. Reports of data that represent the participants remain confidential to minimise the risk of harm emanating from this as some of the positions of interviewees can be identifiable. Throughout the research process, we followed ethical standards of good research practice (Swedish Research Council, 2017) and comply with the GDPR regulation to process all data from individual participants (University of Gothenburg, 2021).

Results and discussion

In the following section, the the results are presented and discussed. The empirical data are merged in the discussion, which is structured into two sections: Conceptualisation of ownership with in the PPDP, and The practice of ownership.

Conceptualisation of ownership within the PPDP

Our analysis of data shows ambiguity and an inconsistent and differentiated understanding of ownership among partners. The idea of ownership takes an indispensable part of the initiative in this study. The partnerships started with the acknowledgment of project execution using a common participation framework, as made explicit in the project document: 'The implementation of the project will be exercised by a rights-based approach, meaning that central principles such as participation, transparency, non-discrimination, and accountability will be concretised along with implementation' (UNIDO, 2012, p. 9).

The assessment of ownership conceptualisation reveals that ownership is commended throughout the project document. The initiative was designed on the premise of maintaining equal participation, as set out by the principles of the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005). However, with the Paris Declaration resulting in an incomplete and elusive ownership conceptualisation (Söderbaum, 2017), the project document intricates the concept of ownership failing to provide a complete explanation of who should own what and which elements of the partnership. Therefore, participants provide various interpretations of the concept. These are subsumed into three major categories as follows.

Stakeholders' engagement confused with mutuality and reciprocity

Firstly, it is understood that most respondents from all members of the partnership view ownership in terms of mutuality and reciprocity. Respondents highlight that partnership duties and responsibilities should be based on the general presumption that all stakeholders contribute according to their potential capabilities. Partners are expected to be assigned tasks that they are able to perform. However, this notion of ownership, implying actors' involvement or contribution, is fused with a symmetrical relationship between stakeholders. A respondent from SDTVC reflects:

> When we entered the partnership what we agreed upon was to put in place holistic ownership and a mutual relationship, by that we mean implementing a mutually beneficial partnership. We assume this to mean that all stakeholders exchange and combine their competencies and resources.

The significance of understanding the concept concerning who is responsible during various parts of the project stresses each member's role in maintaining equal participation. The conceptualisation of ownership from the perspective of stakeholders' engagement is mistaken for equal participation and a mutual relationship. Another respondent reflects:

> It is difficult to distinguish the exact responsibility of each partner as we are multi-actors. Every stakeholder's contribution matters equally in this PPDP to address TVET problems. We should have equal participation and mutual engagement. That way we assume a mutual relationship.

When ownership is associated with sharing responsibility and division of duties in accordance with different partners' potential capabilities, it can be an important requirement for the practical functioning of the project. However, its interpretation must not be confused with the degree of relationship and reciprocity maintained. None of the participants articulated the distinction clearly.

Ownership as local participation and commitment across partnership process

Secondly, when examining ownership and the factors that facilitate the promotion of ownership, the consideration of issues related to participation, commitment, and responsibility is crucial. For recipient parties to acquire ownership of not only partnership objectives but also the implementation process, the level of their commitment is vital (De Valk et al., 2005).

Some interviewees representing local actors deliberate on the notion that ownership should be a guiding principle right from the setup of the partnership, and that this will ensure that the aims of the project are achieved, and this is also intended to secure strong commitment and equal participation of local actors in the implementation process and eventually to achieve better results. A respondent discloses: 'maintaining equal participation should be a motto for collaboration. Because the efforts of obtaining the required level of commitment to

achieving the project outcome would become a futile exercise without the appropriate participation of the end-users.'

Similarly, other respondents from SDTVC underline that ownership is considered meaningful and partnership secures commitment when local actors conjointly plan, design, and participate with international counterparts in the partnership process. Otherwise, as Nathan (2007) maintains, there is no commitment where there is no ownership. This conceptualisation of ownership with local control and commitment in many aspects of a partnership is a new finding vis-à-vis the previous interpretation.

The importance of local commitment is crystal clear, and a partnership will be more easily accepted and can secure stronger local commitment when there is balanced participation, free from any kind of influence (Swedlund, 2011). With the change in the new form of partnership modality, major project activities should not be left to some actors only. Participants from the public sector underscore that it should be clear from the beginning to whom ownership relates.

> As local partners, we need to share the influence and power with international actors, that way we can own the project. Otherwise, if we are amenable to the whims of international actors it will be hard to commit to the partnership and thereby our ownership could become uncertain.

Local ownership, fully in charge over various stages of the initiative, is associated with equal participation promoted for recipients to influence the partnership process. According to Swedlund (2011) participation by locals, having a seat at the table does not necessarily imply local control or influence, unless equal power relations are maintained between them and donors.

Ownership will be enhanced when local capacity is built through active participation in the process of project operations and management, and this will, in turn, facilitate better conditions for commitment. A participant from the TVET agency stresses:

> For local actors to develop their capacity and learn to stand on their own two feet, government representatives and the host school should have to claim ownership over their responsibility in project decision-making. The staff must take part in the administration and implementation process.

Local empowerment thrives when participation is allowed into the process – when it 'enables local people to make their analyses, to take command, to gain confidence and to implement their own choices and decisions' (Lie, 2019, p. 1112). Hence, local participation, commitment, and ownership cannot be separated. Ownership concerns local actors' commitment and to what extent they take part in the development project process. Overall, ownership is conceived as a means for triggering local actors to feel included in all aspects of the initiative requiring commitment secured through capacity built by active participation in the process.

Ownership as local actors' control of the outcome and as part of PPDP sustainability
Thirdly, in contention to what is enshrined in the project document and the responses of local actors, the deliberation of most respondents from international actors relate to the notion of ownership to project sustainability and locals' control over the outcomes. Ownership is considered crucial for the recipients taking over the programme at the end of the project's lifetime, and for them to sustain what the initiative aims to accomplish. This understanding of ownership can be evidenced in a respondent's remark: 'At the onset, we designed the partnership as a pilot project with a sensible governance structure to put in place for local actors to take over, sustain and scale up the initiative's best experiences when international partners move.'

The interpretation of ownership as an outcome of the development intervention is further evidenced in an interview with a participant representing international partners, who argues that collaborative outcomes of the PPDP initiative will be owned by the recipient government and the end-users. Hence, especially SDTVC should never rely on external actors' support but should keep sustaining the impacts beyond the project.

To this end, the participants from international parties argue that local incompetence of PPDP implementation is believed to interfere with the sustainability of the project, and, therefore, they strive to build the capacity of the Ethiopian government and the project host to prepare them for ownership at the end of the intervention. A project staff member reiterates:

> The sustainability of the project is worrisome unless we empower local management. The goal is linked to strengthening the host institutions', and local authorities' technical, analytical, and managerial capacity, and the understanding and the acceptance of the PPDP management principles.

Bearing in mind that the participants from SIDA and UNIDO perceive ownership as local control over project outcome, the tripartite international stakeholders emphasise their leadership intention by ascertaining project control and follow-up as basic principles and masking their domineering position under the cover of local empowerment and institutional capacity building. This is mirrored in their interest to offer project implementation to a third party (UNIDO). A participant explains:

> We want the host school to run the programme independently after five years. Empowering local staff during the project lifetime is our job. UNIDO's presence is to meet this purpose because they have experienced how to implement and coordinate PPDPs elsewhere.

This notion of ownership as an end, and control of the outcome without recipients' possession of the process, signifies power asymmetry between the 'endogenous' and 'exogenous' actors. Such a conceptualisation deviates from what is currently used in partnership policies and literature. Cooke and Kothari (2001)

criticise that donors keep camouflaging centralisation under the banner of decentralisation, indicating an indirect form of tacit governance that threatens local autonomy. Therefore, one may question why 'international actors exclusively refer to the idea of ownership to full control over all partnership dimensions?' (Reich, 2006, p. 7).

In conclusion, in accordance with other research, like Fraser and Whitfield (2009), Gibson et al. (2005), and Lundin (2019), this study concludes that there are inconsistent and different understandings of what ownership is between actors. However, no reflections appear from respondents regarding their understanding of ownership relating to the possession of the partnership objective. We argue that in the context of an all-inclusive partnership, the concept must be unpacked, for all members to have a clear understanding of to what extent every partner exercise ownership and how they will own different aspects of the partnership process. Balanced and equitable participation free from any form of influence should be considered.

The practice of ownership

This section examines how various dimensions of ownership conceptualised above have influenced ownership practice. Discrepancies are observed between how ownership is conceptualised and experienced.

Alignment and harmonisation to local priority

The practice of ownership at the design stage of a partnership programme is decisive. The principles of alignment and harmonisation of the partnership development agenda to local policy priorities are promoted for the benefit of each partner, as they are linked to the need for ownership in MSPs (Bickert & Fowler, 2018; Hayman, 2006).

The TVET initiative in Ethiopia was not formally initiated with ideas of partnership and ownership, as it is an international programme, and only later tailored to local priorities. As interviews indicate, the initiation of the project was based on the decision by the international parties to set up an education project framed in terms of the PPDP model they had previously implemented in Iraq in collaboration with Scania. A participant highlights:

> The international actors believed that the project in Iraq was a ground-breaking venture well underway and progressing positively. As a new approach to providing TVET, it has a high potential for the expansion of best practices in other countries, including Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's growing economic performance attracted the trans-national actors to provide well-targeted training directed at reducing the skills gap. They discussed the development needs of strengthening TVET in Heavy Duty Equipment and Vehicle Repair (HER) following the growing demand for skilled technicians in

the country (UNIDO, 2018). Participants have a common view, that to bridge the skills gap the PPDP initiative is crucial so that the goal of attracting private investment can be addressed, as well as the promotion of industrial development and a contribution towards poverty reduction.

As mentioned above, the establishment of HDECoVA implies that the initiation of the project is not home grown, but the partnership agenda is deemed crucial to local demands. As part of tailoring the PPDP model to fit the local context, there was an open dialogue with local stakeholders. According to a participant from a local authority:

> When this initiative came, the point was whether it best fits our development agenda. I think the PPDP came with a project as a response to Ethiopia's scarcity of skilled mechanics in HER, which has challenged the country's socio-economic development in many ways.

Concomitantly, another respondent states that although the project is internationally driven, it aligns with Ethiopia's TVET priority because of its competency-based approach, and it promotes close cooperation with local companies. The innovative partnership builds a state-of-the-art academy and develops a market-oriented curriculum. Ownership principles, alignment efforts, the integration of locals in the design phase, and the relevance of the project to meet existing challenges, resulted in actors at the receiving end to agree to an agenda prescribed by international actors (Hayman, 2006).

However, this 'rule of the game' in the partnership, implies a consensus on a predetermined agenda, which characterises HDECoVA as a hegemonic partnership, but this raises concerns: 'It is within the interest of the funding partners and the international implementing agency that the project was designed, with training mainly focusing on the HER programme. We cannot change this…'. The straightforward concern in this response is that given the scarcity of resources and the poor quality of TVET in its entirety, locals would have preferred the project to have been extended further into various other programme areas, not only HER. Another respondent adds that the school and the local companies, for example, demand that the new TVET intervention integrate drivers-mechanic training, which encountered a challenge from international actors who want to exclusively focus on the mechanics aspect only.

Against the rhetoric of harmonisation in the agreement, such decisions indicate that strategies in development partnerships tend to be designed in line with the preferences and priorities of funding actors (Hughes & Hutchison, 2012). This project is not well-anchored with the local context, as the local authorities and the school have unfulfilled demands that are not included in the project structure, so they did not influence their priority agenda. Ellersiek (2018) and OECD (2005) state that recipient actors better own a partnership initiative when it is directly linked to their development priorities, under the framework of the Paris

Declaration and the sustainable development agenda. If local partners and the school do not have a say in the project's design, a superficially initiated consensus-oriented education partnership is an incomplete project from the start. In light of sociological and institutional factors, it is necessary to understand what comprises TVET programmes and how they might be implemented most effectively (Billett, 2011).

Exclusion of relevant stakeholders

Agenda 2030 urges stakeholders to commit to leaving no one behind in partnerships. To this end, the third principle of the 2011 high level forum on partnership for effective development cooperation held in Busan (OECD, 2011) stresses the need for 'inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships' to redress all the bottlenecks towards ensuring democratic ownership (Ellersiek, 2018). Once the design of the partnership is crafted, it is wise to question how actors' engagement can be explained in other stages of the partnership. The answer is that ownership is promoted with the commitment and participation of local actors, however, this is overlooked in most cases. A general depiction is that structural or power inequities, poor representation, and participation as manifestations of a limited ownership function, noted throughout the case study, attests that ownership is 'abundant in policy, but absent in practice' (Krogstad, 2014, p. 105).

The participation of local stakeholders, both at the strategic and operational levels of the HDECoVA initiative is very limited. As learned from the project document, neither the MoE nor the Federal TVET Agency, high-level authorities in charge of all the responsibilities of educational matters in Ethiopia, were signatories to qualify as foundation partners in the development project (UNIDO, 2012).

Interviews demonstrate that representatives of the international partners claim that there is an interest conflict between the Ministry of Industry (MoI) and the MoE, as the PPDP excludes a relevant actor from the education sector. There is an overlapping role that demands the contributions of both the education and industry sectors to oversee the TVET project. The competition over mandates is justified as a factor for transnational actors to decide with who they would like to partner. The PPDP involves the MoI as a potential local ally because of its allegedly 'better insights' and 'appropriateness' to coordinate the work of a TVET partnership concerning industry development. A project staff member explains:

> The MoI was chosen as the right partner because we believe it is mandated to the promotion of industrial development in the country, which is the main concern of our partnership. The international partners assumed that working with the ministry could provide good opportunities for coordination with the project and make it easier if we wanted to access industries for cooperative training and employment opportunities.

Here, the identification of local partners mirrors the preferences of the international stakeholders, conflicting with the interests of local stakeholders, who feel they are peripheral in the partnership. Despite the rhetoric, such excluding decisions, and preferences of who should be involved in the partnership without careful analysis of their relevance, shape power relations in favour of the international actors (Swedlund, 2011). This reflects again a new and different face of partnership governance (Reich, 2006) that can weaken the collaborative endeavour.

The international actors' selective, but inappropriate inclusion of local actors, consequently, infringes on the notion of ownership, which eventually amplified tension when the project failed to secure the required commitment from the MoE in Ethiopia and put project implementation on hold for some time. Although the curriculum for the new academy was prepared in harmony with the national TVET strategy, to make training acceptable at a national level, the bureaucratic process for getting it approved by the MoE took about three years (UNIDO, 2018). This situation was worsened by the authority's consistent leniency to scale up lessons learned from HDECoVA to other TVET schools.

As the international actors reacted to the problem late in the process, it bore little fruit in the end, according to a participant:

> Initially, we imagined that the Ministry of Education might not have direct roles in project operations. They could have helped in many respects, including maintaining national quality standards. We realised their importance when the project was delayed for a long period. Even later, they showed little sense of ownership in the partnership to scale up best practices of the TVET programme in general.

The situation, where relevant actors are considered to play a secondary role in the partnership, provided weakened opportunities for locals in the process. One cannot expect responsibility from stakeholders who are not recognised or who do not consider themselves as main participants (Draxler, 2008).

Most respondents from the host institution also identify HDECoVA's structure as problematic overlooking the active engagement of experts or personnel from SDTVC. They tend to see the dominance of a few UNIDO employees in the project operation. An academic staff member says, 'if the partnership sought to introduce innovation and if it had been implemented well, it would have been important to at least involve the department head or college dean of HDECoVA in the decision-making process.'

The finding supports Biekart and Fowler's (2018) claim of the importance of 'unpacking' stakeholders in partnerships. The more limited the level and size of participation, the thinner the possibility of exercising ownership by diverse, relevant stakeholders, both at strategic and operational levels. The absence of adequate representation and engagement of local actors can never guarantee local commitment to project sustainability.

Hegemonic role of the international partner

The findings from the research of the HDECoVA partnership reveal a perpetuation of historically constituted power inequalities in education partnerships. The structural setup of the PPDP model points to instances of power asymmetry and a hegemonic relationship, where the international actors exert an indirect influence over local counterparts. One strong weakness of the partnership is that all administrative staff members of the SDTVC project frequently point out that the management approach of the PPDP model offered a domineering role to the agency. The partner identified as having a massive influence on the process is UNIDO, exclusively shouldering a multitude of project implementation roles. UNIDO staff members occupy several important positions and are responsible for school management coaching, day-to-day project operation management, procurement, business plan development, reporting, and donor outreach (LKDF, 2018; UNIDO, 2018). A representative of SDTVC expresses his resentment:

> … some of the tasks should be left to local partners. I know we have contributed in terms of staff salary, but we are not included in the main operations. I do not believe we have full ownership of the partnership.

In the changing partnership landscape, the irony, as learned from the participants at SDTVC and the project document, is that the framing of HDECOVA's governance structure reproduces asymmetries between international and local actors, where the local college is labelled as a 'training host', while UNIDO is referred to as an 'implementing agency'.

Such dominant references to international actors regarding project management and implementation contradict what was decided upon at the design of the partnership, which states that the project will be implemented on the ground according to a common participation framework. This gives rise to the view that the rhetoric of decentralising power is easier in writing than performed on the ground by international actors reasserting hegemony in development cooperation (Borchgrevink, 2008).

The justification for this presented by the international actors mirrors the reasons described by Ludin (2019) i.e., lack of institutional capacity to run the project. Concentrating the different tasks around the UNIDO project office was considered fair and positive to local actors. This management approach is derived from the discussion forums and the governance structure that all partners agreed to comply with. Although many of the tasks are skewed towards the implementing partner, all the responsibilities in the PPDP agreement consider every actor's potential capability, according to respondents from the international actors and participants from MoI.

As an innovative model of partnership in its kind, applied to strengthen TVET in Ethiopia and build the institutional capacity of SDTVC, this project was considered vital, according to a UNIDO representative:

> It is good to be aware of the varied nature of partnering organisations, and essential to understanding how to combine partners' different capabilities to work together, to manage and implement the PPDP project well. This demands the use of good experience and extensive knowledge of UNIDO in managing and implementing PPDP projects.

Furthermore, TVET projects are human resource-intensive and demand a wide variety of expertise and competencies. Cognisant of the institutional resource and skills gaps at SDTVC, UNIDO was mandated to empower and coach local staff to ensure future ownership and sustainability of the project. A representative of Volvo points out:

> Weak local capacity seemed to interfere with the smooth running of the project. We worried about the sustainability of the project if the problem persisted. For sustainable development of the TVET project, the initiative strives to strengthen the partners, the host institutions, and significant local authorities' implementation and managerial capacity.

Most participants from the international partners say that due to constraints and weak capacity on the part of the recipient government and the host college, the implementation of the PPDP initiative is considered a learning platform on how to strengthen and transform TVET programmes. This should end up as a complete takeover of the programmes by locals after the projects are phased out, regardless of their ownership, with active engagement in the partnership process.

The assumption that the accomplishment of local ownership is impeded by constraints in local capacity, however, is challenged in literature by, for example, Krogstad (2014) and Nathan (2007), who argue that ownership should not be taken for granted as easily nurtured during the programme and should be made available by international partners to the local side. Instead, it should be a function of skills to be developed through active participation in the development process.

On the part of the local actors, a respondent from the MoE discloses that these actions not only crystallise international actors' domination but also stifle local autonomy. The point is supported by Krasner (2004), who claims that such arrangements can be maintained even in the case of voluntary agreements, which on the one hand show sovereignty, but on the other hand threaten local autonomy. Hence, hiding behind the camouflage of addressing institutional constraints and building capacities, the role of the 'implementation agency' does not qualify the PPDP model as fair and participatory by any standard of a development partnership (Ellerisk, 2018).

As the case of HDECoVA reveals, despite the efforts to reframe a partnership into a better participatory form of governance, asymmetrical power relations endure, whereby those in management positions, financial, technical, and material resources, remain in their hegemonic hierarchical positions. Stakeholders' decision-making is pretended to be exercised on an equal basis, yet the most powerful actor takes on a differing position in the partnership relative to others. This can

impede HDECoVA from bringing forward the desired change and limit local actors from influencing the PPDP operation. Consequently, the implementing agency wields a strong capacity to shift the direction of the partnership, maintaining previous historical forms of governance in development cooperation. Similar findings have been provided by Lie (2019).

Financial ownership

Partnerships need different accountability structures, among these financial ones (Mena & Guido, 2012). There is a weak financial accountability and transparency structure in the HDECoVA project, resulting in local actors acquiring little ownership of the project in terms of financial decision-making.

Participants voice concerns regarding the framework of the partnership, which features few opportunities for direct decision-making on financial matters and procurement procedures, through the exclusion of SDTVC and the recipient authorities. Instead, the international actors exert influence on financial matters in the partnership.

A representative of SDTVC reports that the school was only mandated involvement in monitoring and evaluation, in discussions on already prepared financial reports, and when necessary could request the project management unit for a purchase order for equipment and supplies:

> … the college has no financial freedom. It is all up to UNIDO to operate financial routines and make decisions. I feel that they have accountability concerns, but they never reveal it openly. Instead, they prefer to do it by themselves.

The weak PPDP accountability and transparency structure has created discontent among SDTVC staff, who feel that engaging local actors in financial routines, decision making, and reporting is a non-negotiable condition. One of the participants shared this sentiment saying: 'One never sees a horse's teeth when it comes as a gift'. He continues:

> We do not want to ruin our relationship with our partners coming with resources and finance […] though we don't participate in financial issues; we believe that the money coming from them at least serves the interests of poor students attending the college.

Given that the PPDP model is implemented by a third party, notably the multilateral agency, SDTVC did not directly receive either in-kind contributions from Volvo or funds from SIDA, but only through the channel of UNIDO, as reflected in the following excerpt.

> The ownership of in-kind goods passes to UNIDO and upon receipt by UNIDO, with the intent for ownership to pass to the training centre at the end of the project period. Volvo is responsible for the transfer of in-kind goods to UNIDO, where UNIDO takes responsibility for the transfer of the in-kind goods to HDECOVA.

More interestingly, the TVET institution, especially the leadership at SDTVC, does not disclose their discontent against the unbalanced representation of locals for fear of losing their international allies, who come with a pro-poor agenda for improving the TVET programme through the PPDP. This implies the existence of a principal-agent relationship between the international actors and the TVET School (Irfan, 2015).

Although financial management, reporting, monitoring, and evaluation are valued as important and systematic, the results from the above analysis, indicate that these activities were implemented according to UNIDO's management and reporting systems. The progress reports are also not jointly prepared by all project stakeholders but discussed afterward by the main partners, including local actors. As argued by one of the government representatives, approving mid-term and final evaluation reports by the Addis Ababa Bureau of Finance and Economic Development does not imply local ownership of project finances.

Based on evidence from the HDECoVA project, international actors rhetorically support local 'ownership', yet financial decision-making, in this case, is controlled entirely by the international actors. Although SIDA and UNIDO do have rigorous guidelines for budget transfer and utilisation and employ strong financial management strategies, these can also vary across different projects with different governments and private sector actors (Edgren, 2002). In this case, participants reflect that there was a strong demand by both international actors to control and manage resources invested to ensure transparency and accountability. Although organisations strictly follow their rigorous financial guidelines, the design of the partnership could be adjusted in a clear manner, to ensure mutual accountability and transparency, as stipulated in the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005) without affecting the strict procedures of the international partners.

This suggests that the influence of financially strong actors has not declined, but rather altered its approach to what Swedlund (2011) claims to be a more centralised collaboration, but, in this case, appears to be neither the old form of donorship nor a new approach of ownership. Instead of attaching conditionality to financial support or exerting pressure from outside, the donor and the implementing agency shape the PPDP model to their preferences, and local actors can have input at a later stage regarding the reports and final evaluations, while the donor and UNIDO exercise implementation and decision making on their own.

Hence, there are loud concerns that the PPDP initiative under the leadership of international actors curtails the autonomy of local partners to exercise financial decision-making and this puts a strain on the relationship between different donors and local actors, and thereby the legitimacy of the PPDP and its effectiveness can be questioned. Equitable financial decision-making, to better ensure transparency and accountability within HDECOVA, needs to be maintained.

Conclusion

This study has explored actors' conceptualisation, and experience of ownership in MSPs. Close to 15 years have passed since the notion of ownership became a central principle in international development cooperation. As evidenced in this case study, however, the way ownership is interpreted remains inconsistent and incoherent.

In the case of HDECOVA, the notion of ownership was not implemented as originally predicted, i.e., a less donor-driven, and inclusive of relevant local actors. Thematic agendas were set, and local partners were selected in accordance with the preferences of the international actors. Education/TVET authorities, including the administration and academic staff of the training host, were excluded from the management and implementation of the project. As is clear from the fieldwork, facilitating local empowerment due to weak institutional capacity and the novelty of the PPDP approach, served as a cover-up for international actors to maintain a hold over the project by allowing a third party outside of the recipient end to manage, implement, and financially administer the PPDP.

A major implication is that neither the traditional form of donorship nor ownership typifies the project, but what is observed is a more centralised form of collaboration in favour of the international partners. If the main purpose of institutional capacity is to facilitate a local takeover at the end of the project, how can empowerment become possible without the recipients' active engagement in the implementation process? These indirect governance mechanisms not only undermine ownership but also put locals under exogenic supervision and reproduces asymmetrical relationships, which work against the original rhetoric of the ownership concept.

MSPs are not sustainable if they are dominated by external actors and merely implemented locally. Recipients must be integrated into the design and decision-making process, for it to work well (Reich, 2006). Donors must recognise that ownership in its contemporary meaning requires equal responsibility from every partner and local ownership can be maintained only when local actors are part of the design, implementation, and decision-making process founded on grounds of mutuality, power symmetry, and free from influence. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to focus on co-ownership of partnerships and the nature of the relationship between internal and external actors when conceptualising and implementing ownership in the PPDP approach.

Disclosure statement

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