

**Aid taken for granted?  
From local “ownership” towards “autonomy” in aid  
projects**

**Peter de Valk**

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the meaning of ‘local ownership in aid projects’, the current vogue in aid practice for improving project results. Ownership by an organization is understood as a metaphor in a behavioural sense when compared to ownership by individuals. Aid involves intercultural relations and aspects of inequality between organizations and individuals. The paper pursues three main lines of inquiry: firstly into the fundamental understanding of individual concepts of cognitive and emotional facilities involved in inter-cultural understanding and exchanges; secondly into the possibility to translate concepts appropriate to individual human beings into useful organizational concepts; and thirdly into the relation between individuals and organizations. Four different perspectives of aid are discussed in relation to local ownership: ethical, bureaucratic, incentives, rational expectations. The outcome of the paper is a critical reflection on different perspectives on local ownership and a comparison between them in terms of complementarities and conflicts. Different notions of ownership relate to these perspectives. While focussing on aid projects, elements of the analysis can be useful for aid programmes and processes of policy formulation. Finally, the paper proposes to replace the notion of “ownership” by “autonomy”.

## 1 INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

This paper will critically analyse the notion of “ownership in aid projects”. The concept of *ownership of a project or policy by an organization* can be loosely understood as to capture the degree of responsibility that the organization has and shows for the design, the planning and implementation of the project or policy and for sustaining the results.

While not altogether new, the current concern with ownership, participation and partnership must be understood in the context of a number of global developments, including a shift away from government guided development towards market forces, privatization, the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is partially informed by a study carried out ‘on ownership in aid projects’ in seven different countries (Guimarães, Apthorpe, and Valk 2002). This study consists of a main report and six accompanying country studies (which include descriptions of the case study projects). Valk (2005) provides a summary of these studies. This work was the starting point for further reflection, also (more indirectly) drawing on personal experiences as aid worker in Zambia and as development policy consultant to various governments in Africa and Asia. I have greatly benefited from the interaction with Raymond Apthorpe and João Guimarães during our joint work on ownership in aid projects (see Guimarães, Apthorpe, and Valk 2002). Kristin Komives and George Lengkeek were so kind to comment on earlier drafts. Four anonymous reviewers provided valuable comments, which led to substantial changes.

rise of civil society as a development agent and lobbying force, and dissatisfaction with the results of development interventions (Fowler 2000a). Some view the increasing powers of international NGOs and their discourse on ownership, participation and partnerships as a sign of increasing external penetration into Third World affairs and warn against full heartedly and uncritically embracing this new wisdom (Fowler 2000a, Tembo 2003, Tucker 1999).<sup>2</sup> Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers is assumed to improve ownership and implementation. But most experiences reflect limited consultation and an ensuing lack of ownership (Oxfam International 2004). Discussions on ownership proceed without much critical reflection on the concept itself and its relations to the context in which it operates. This forms the justification of this paper.

There are three major aspects to the notion of ‘ownership in aid projects. First, the concept of ownership (outside the legal context) is more appropriate for individuals than for organizations. But organizations are more than groups of individuals. Organizations have goals, structures, institutions, and resources of their own. Uncritically using ownership for organizations introduces an anthropomorphic element. Yet, the practice of organizational action reflects a mix of individual motivations and organizational priorities. Organizational priorities and strategies are made by people (managers, policy analysts, etc), obtain some degree of stability (organizational structure) and influence or constrain the actions of employees, who still maintain their individual motivations. The reality of organizational agency is a mix of organizational and individual elements. How to distinguish organizational ownership from individual ownership?

Second, projects (or programmes and policies) represent complex sets of relationship. What does it mean when an organization owns ‘a project’?

Third, in the aid context, ownership most often implies a form of joint ownership. Then, ownership comes close to the notions of partnership and participation. This brings the aid relations into focus and, with that, relations of inequality and power.

The main conclusions are firstly that ownership by an organization must be analyzed not just through its intentions and priorities but primarily through its practice. This is where individuals of the organizations are steered by organizational structures to operate on resource distributions, other organizations and individuals; where the organization exerts power.

Further, applying the first conclusion to projects, organizational ownership means influencing or controlling project processes and outcomes, in addition to being able to use the

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<sup>2</sup> This would also include bilateral and multilateral agencies, which strongly underwrite these approaches.

project output. With two or more organizations cooperating in one project, the result will always be a form of multiple ownership and the *degree* of ownership replaces a notion of absolute ownership.

Third, in the aid relation multiple ownership can move towards genuine joint ownership. However, unequal power relations severely limit and shape the degree of ownership of the receiving organization. Power can be analyzed at three levels: (a) direct power over objects and subjects, (b) power over conditions important to subjects, and (c) power of shaping ideology and consciousness.

Fourth, given all these ambiguities and limitations of the concept of ownership, this paper proposes to replace this concept by the degree of autonomy of an organization. This concept is more easily operationalised than that of ownership. By implication and nearly tautologically, an autonomous organization will own its own projects. Analyzing the degree of autonomy in making decisions on specific (elements of) projects will shed light on whether project implementation will be sustained and in which manner.

In actual practice, different perspectives on aid and ownership co-exist. Four perspectives will be analysed and compared: the ethical perspective; the bureaucratic perspective; the incentives perspective and the rational expectation perspective. These perspectives are analyzed in terms of their main identifying concept, their underlying theoretical reference points, the outcome for ownership and their explicit and implicit (or hidden) treatment of the three levels of power relations. The development practitioner will find these perspectives in both development discourse and practice. Distinguishing these perspectives as elements in complex aid relations will not only improve understanding but also contribute to more realistic interventions.

The empirical point of reference of this paper for analyzing local ownership is the field of technical assistance projects, with its typical triangle of relationships between the aid provider, the (mostly foreign) consultant, and the aid receiving local organization.<sup>3</sup> However, much of what will be said applies to the wider field of development interventions (including policy development and conditionality) where organizations cooperate across nationalities and cultures and in a context of unequal distribution of resources and power.

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<sup>3</sup> This triangle is identified as the effective core in technical assistance project by Martens, e.a. (2002) and Ostrom (2001), although in the latter in the wider context of in total eight typical institutions. Also within this typical triangle, further differentiation is possible in terms of the nature of the organizations involved, the field of cooperation, and the expected outcomes. In principle, the ideas presented here could be worked out along those lines. However, to systematically trace these differences and their implications for the concerns of this paper would require much more space and time.

Given that in a private market context, ownership by organizations of their projects is less problematic, donor organizations try to stimulate local ownership of aid projects by creating a quasi-market conditions *vis-à-vis* the supply of services transferred in the aid project, coupled with a hands-off approach at the donor side. The donor becomes the ‘financier’ so to speak and the local organization is assumed to be fully in charge of the (mostly foreign) consultant. The quasi-market situation for the local organization is further ensured, one hopes, by insisting on cost-sharing between aid provider and receiver as an indication of the local organization’s willingness to pay for the project and having the local organization in charge of the various project phases and elements including tendering, contracting and contract monitoring in relation with the consultant.

After this introductory section, the paper will start in section two with discussing the relationship between aid, power and ownership. The third section conceptualizes the meaning of organizational behaviour when using individualistic human concepts (humanoids). Section four compares interaction between individuals to interactions between organizations, drawing on elements of organizational theory, psychology and critical philosophy. The next section reviews the concept of ownership in projects and discusses the possibility of multiple ownership. This will prepare for the discussion in the sixth section on perspectives on aid and local ownership of aid projects. Finally, the concluding section will discuss the implications for aid in practice.

## **2 AID, POWER, AND OWNERSHIP**

Aid can be described as a multi-level social, cultural and economic relationship between unequal partners involved in a two-directional asymmetric exchange of resources, benefits, values and feelings. Success at one level does not necessarily imply or require success at a different level. Some persons may be helped, others are not. Some may benefit with costs for others.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Other definitions or descriptions of aid may be more appropriate to other situations or to highlight different aspects. Emphasizing resource transfer (resource view), aid can be seen as the resource given by one party to another for achieving the latter’s objectives (food-aid; technical aid; budget support; balance of payment support; investment support). Focussing on the whole aid system with all its complexities (sector view) aid can be described as is the whole set of organizations, institutions and activities, which have developed in and between rich and poor countries, involved in a process of transferring resources, values and feelings between unequal partners. Exposing the underlying struggle between rich and poor, aid (in a conflict view) can be described as the whole set of institutions, which have developed in and between rich and poor countries, involved in a conflict over the conditions and modalities of redistributing resources from richer to poorer parties.

Aid occurs in situations where one party (the aid provider) “controls resources that another party needs”. This brief description of aid is almost identical to a simple definition of a power (Clegg 1989).<sup>5</sup> Essentially, therefore, the aid-relationship is a power relationship.

More elaborate definitions of power (following Lukes 1974)<sup>6</sup> involve three dimensions or levels of power: power over resources; power in shaping and maintaining structures and power to establish the dominant discourse. These three levels can also be identified in the aid relationship. In addition to the first level of material and human resources, also aid modalities, international aid structures and institutions are largely controlled by aid providers; changes in aid discourse, including statements of aid organizations and of individuals, are introduced by aid providers, their evaluators and supportive academics. Development theory, development studies and development economics all have a normative grounding and all are of western origin (Rist 1999). Recent examples are the notions of partnership, ownership, and participation as they are developed as a dominant discourse (Cooke and Kothari 2001). The Logical Framework Approach, demanded by many donor agencies, is also cited as an instrument of control (Dale 2003; Gasper 2000). To highlight the significance of individuals internalizing of development discourse Crewe and Harrison (1998) provide the example of a Zambian farmer who developed a vision for his village without consideration for its consequences for the people in his village and justified this with the use of development notions.

The aid receivers (and their allies) can choose ‘the voice option’ and adopt a stance of radical (global) citizenship in order to try and contribute to changes in the aid discourse, participating for transformation (Hickey and Mohan 2004).<sup>7</sup> Radical ownership by the local organization in the project encounter would imply an independent position vis-à-vis the aid provider, incorporating useful elements of what a donor would have to offer. The balance of power in the partnership is more towards the local organization. This is not without consequences and necessarily in the advantage of the disadvantaged groups and individuals.

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<sup>5</sup> Many different definitions exist. For instance, Max Weber (1974) defines (coercive) power as: the probability that one actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests. In the aid context, power is not only coercive, but can even be facilitating and empowering. The main point is that power implies the ability to act. In that sense it comes close to the concept of agency.

<sup>6</sup> Lucas’ definition of the third level of power involved ascertaining the true interests of the dominated party. Only then is it possible to know whether the dominated person does not really share these values and has a false consciousness. Critics argued that this cannot be known and focused instead on processes and activities undertaken to influence the dominated party, which can be observed (Clegg 1989).

<sup>7</sup> The concepts ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ in relation to firms, organizations and states are from Hirschman (1970). They can easily be extended to participation in aid processes.

In Bangladesh this shift involved ‘paradoxes of institutionalization’ (Feldman 2003). The strong voice and organizational strength of the NGOs vis-à-vis the donor community and the state, led to ‘a shift in the discourse from social welfare and redistribution to individualism, entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and empowerment’ (ibid.). Consequently, NGOs were ‘speaking *on behalf*’ of their members rather than mobilizing people to speak on their own behalf’ ... [with the result that] ... ‘gender inequality and other structural conditions that reinforce poverty are left unchallenged by most NGOs’ (ibid. italics in the original).

When the aid receiver chooses ‘the exit option’ as an escape from this unequal relation, aid interventions become donor-owned and sustainability of aid projects is in danger. While this is a matter of degree, the balance of aid relations changes from joint relationships to donor-driven interventions and a parallel shift from the aid receiver as a subject of interventions to that of an object. Lack of ownership of aid projects, programs and policies is seen as the principle reason for poor implementation.<sup>8</sup>

### **3 INDIVIDUAL CONCEPTS AND ORGANIZATIONAL METAPHORS**

This paper is about *ownership of a project by an organization*. Ownership by an organization normally implies a legal relationship between the organization as a legal body and other legal entities. Used in this way, it has precise meaning described in the legal terms. Here the use of this concept is quite different and refers to human emotions and feelings of responsibility and commitment. In literature, these concepts are used for organizations as ‘humanoids’ (anthropomorphic language) without providing adequate definitions at the level of organizations. Yet, the typical human experience of psychological emotions and inter-subjectivity involved in these concepts cannot be reciprocated for organizations.

Two complementary approaches can be followed to try and understand these and other anthropomorphic concepts at the level of organizations, in this paper called the ‘aggregation-reduction approach’ and ‘behaviouralist approach’. The ‘aggregation-reduction approach’ looks at organizations as collection of individuals and therefore reduces organizational concepts to a multitude of individual human concepts. Possible interactions between

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<sup>8</sup> A search on the World Bank website for “ownership” returned 1406 records and, when combined with “implementation”, 442 records. Not all subscribe to the dominant discourse. For instance, Buiter (2004) has criticized the notion of country ownership: ‘In conclusion, the concept of ‘country ownership’ has been used and abused in so many ways that it now is at best unhelpful and at worst misleading and obfuscating. When the statement ‘this program is country-owned’ means no more than ‘this program is supported by the people who own the country’, it is time to purge it from our vocabulary’.



individuals in the organizational environment may lead to changes in their feelings, emotions and understanding. Yet these concepts remain essentially human, albeit influenced by the organizational context. Etzioni (1961) identifies three types of power that organizations can apply to make individuals follow organizational priorities: coercive, remunerative and moral. Particularly the moral type of power will feature more strongly in development oriented organizations. This will be reinforced by the ethics that prevail in society and by the selection process of people working for development organizations.

The 'behaviouralist' approach translates these human concepts to organizational concepts. By analysing what these concepts mean in terms of actions at the level of the individual (forsaking, for the time being, their emotional and psychological content), and then to investigate if it is possible to identify similar activities for organizations. Thus, the meaningful similarity is compared with regard to actions and activities, not emotions and feelings. Using human concepts for organizations in this meaningful way boils down to using them as metaphors. Organizations behave as if they are committed, as if they feel ownership and so on. The metaphors become useful shorthand for a certain set of activities that bears resemblance to activities undertaken by individuals characterised by those words.<sup>9</sup>

For example, the 'memory' of an organization can be understood as the physical storage place of information (computers, files, etc.) coupled with organizational practice (organizational 'scripts' or 'routines', as they are called in organizational learning theories) that guide employees to store potentially useful information, retrieve relevant information, and bring it under the attention of departments that can utilize the information for their departmental objectives.<sup>10</sup>

This seems to be an adequate picture of an organizational memory. Yet, the typical human emotions that come with remembering are absent in the organizational metaphor, useful as it may be to indicate something similar to individual remembering at the organizational level. However, this last step is an essential human step and must be done by

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<sup>9</sup> Using metaphors can be both creative and dangerous. The creativity consists in recognizing the resemblance of an existing concept in one context in another context and discovering the potential of the transfer of meaning in the new context. The relational use of a word (i.e. its meaning) stimulates finding unexpected relations (the loose ends, so to speak) in the new context. The danger consists in uncritically accepting all possible relations of the original concept in its new context.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, the last step of organizational remembering is taken when the information is put in the inbox of the relevant manager. The manager then employs his/her human facilities to put the information in a context and to provide meaning for the organization. Remembering in an organization is purposeful. Remembering for individuals can not only be purposeful but also by association. Unlike in organizations, it is related to positive and negative passion, when the richness of the full experience is recreated. This does not happen in organizations, although it is tempting to look for relevant metaphors also here.

individuals, although organizations can create conducive environments for this to happen. The importance of this last step will be discussed under the bureaucratic perspective of aid (page 21).

The concept of corporate culture can be used to provide the link between the behaviouralist and the aggregation-reduction approach. Nooteboom (2000) argues that an important role of the entrepreneur/manager in organizations is to provide for motivational coordination, creating a corporate culture that focuses interest and values of its employees for maximum cooperation in interaction, within the framework of the firms own objectives and competitive competences.<sup>11</sup> This view links up with the work of Simon (1991) where identification with the organization through corporate culture is argued to be of crucial importance for the purpose of coordination. From a different angle, in terms of power analysis, corporate culture forms part of the third level of power of the employers over the individuals (Clegg 1989) and can be seen as one part of the moral type of power as identified by Etzioni (1961). Corporate culture links the individual with the organization (the micro with the meso) in practice (and in theory). A wider concept of corporate identity can be used to explain organizational behaviour as a corollary to the individual psyche. This would consist of the organization's mission, competences, structure and culture. However, the details of and interactions between these elements are no longer comparable in a straightforward manner to the human psyche.

The behavioural interpretation of organizational ownership focuses the discussion on what an organization does (agency). In practice, the activities of organizations are carried out by individuals whose behaviour is only partially shaped and constrained by the organizational identity. Contradictions can develop as a result. For example, an organization has committed itself to a strategy of stimulating local ownership but the employees 'in charge' of the project feel committed to stimulate, steer and control.

## **4 AUTONOMY AND INTERACTION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS**

In cross-cultural aid settings, organizations must learn. Organizational learning can be described as the change in organizational scripts or routines (ways of doing things). First

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed for Nooteboom (2000) this is the most crucial task for the entrepreneur and gives a more fundamental and dynamic explanation why firms exist than the more static explanation of transaction cost theory. In this view then, the firm is seen as primarily and fundamentally a motivational focussing device. This paper is on organizations in general which do not necessarily operate in the market and therefore may have different *raison d'être*. The motivational device however seems crucial also for ensuring good organizational performance in general.

order learning entails greater efficiency of substitution of information into scripts. Second order learning entails changes in first order script architecture, in processes of exploration (the organizational processes that govern this behaviour are called second order routines).<sup>12</sup> A third level of learning would be the level of meta-learning: learning how to learn. The relatively recent field of knowledge management focuses on the latter as an explicit strategy available to organizations (Sanchez 2001).

Organizational learning occurs within organizations as well as between organizations. Holmqvist (2003) describes the interaction between two organizations in terms of two-way processes: internalization from the joint level to the intra-organizational level and externalization from the intra-organizational level to the joint level. The type of learning in the interaction and these processes can be described by exploration (innovating new products) or exploitation (applying new insights to consumer production).

Similar processes can be identified between individuals in cognitive and emotional processes. Psychologists analyse the development of cognition (Shanon 1993) as a process of scaffolding<sup>13</sup> within the parent-child relation (in particular, mother-child) in early development of children. The psychoanalyst Benjamin (1993) describes the development of emotional faculties also in terms of the mother-child relation where the recognition and appreciation of another subject outside the self (intersubjectivity) grows through the continued love and attention of the mother towards the child. Both processes, cognitive and emotional, require sustained activity and feeling from the mother (or the parent). In the process of personal growth, the child becomes more and more autonomous and will more independently define its own reality. Transaction Analysis describes how in the mature and healthy person dependency on the parent relationship has been replaced by autonomy (Steward and Joines 1987). Autonomy finds its expression in the person's capacity to be aware, spontaneous, and intimate with others. Autonomous persons are capable of true dialogue (Habermas 1981) and are less susceptible to the third level of power (at the level of discourse). In short, the more autonomous a person, the more he/she is in control of his/her reality.

Within the context of aid projects both cognitive and emotional processes are important in the interaction between individuals (intersubjectivity across cultural differences and knowledge differences) and the interaction between organizations (*inter-action* across organizational cultures and knowledge differences). Generally speaking, without attempting

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<sup>12</sup> This loosely corresponds with the notions of single and double loop learning developed by Argyris and Schön (1978).

<sup>13</sup> New concepts without their full meaning are upheld by the mother until more new concepts provide for the full meaning of these words and concepts jointly in their relational context.

possible nuances, national culture influences both the organizational culture and the individual (norms, values, behaviour), whereas the individual (in organizations) is shaped by national culture as well as organizational culture. Individuals contribute to and maintain organizational culture, but the function it fulfils for the organization and the nature of its contribution differs according to their position in the power ranking (Etzioni 1961).

Specific organizational stereotypes such as the standard production organization, bureaucracy, professional and innovative organization (as described by Mintzberg 1979) reflect different combinations of learning routines and would behave differently towards projects with other organizations in cross-cultural settings. In the order presented these stereotypes reflect increasing reliance on higher order learning processes and routines. As argued before, the nature of aid projects is special in the sense that aid projects are undertaken in a cross-cultural setting and unequal conditions. Specific demands will be placed on the 'attitudes' of participating organizations.<sup>14</sup> The type of organization most capable of cross-cultural adaptation and inter-action (intersubjectivity) would have to be flexible, responding to challenges of its environment. This would be the innovative organization, whereas the bureaucracy will be its negative counterpart. This applies equally to the aid provider and the consultant organization. Aid agencies, being also in aid administration have a tendency towards bureaucratic organizations with that might lose out on the commitment required for the innovative cross-cultural inter-activity. Consultants, in so far as they are professional organizations, have an advantage when the local organization is also a professional organization. The common standards, values and language of the profession can counterbalance the cross-cultural differences. An example of this is provided by Cuambe, Lingen, Somolekae, and Valk (2002) who find that communication between the professional organizations and their employees (including telecom companies, power companies, and land cadastre) was greatly facilitated by shared professional codes and ethics, leading to mutual respect and recognition across the cultural and income divide.

Also, the local organization must be a learning organization, at least in so far as the project is concerned, given that the project purpose is transfer of knowledge. For ownership and partnerships to develop autonomous local organizations are required capable of

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<sup>14</sup> Habermas (1981) distinguishes between communicative action and purposeful action to describe differences in individual behaviour. Communicative action requires a learning attitude and flexibility to change in the discovery of other perspectives. Hofstede (1980) notes power-distance and individualism/collectivism as relevant inter-cultural dimensions. The usefulness of these and other general concepts depends much on their detailed and differentiated understanding in concrete cases.

responding flexibly in accordance with their own set of rules and objectives.<sup>15</sup> They should not be (too) dependent on a wider system of rules (such as many public sector organizations).

At a deeper psychological level, organizations (and groups) function as defence mechanisms against individual anxiety of being left out. Common values and practices are developed.<sup>16</sup> When cooperating with other organizations these mechanisms are challenged by exposure in the interaction. Even with autonomous local organizations, the inequality in power and resources between the aid provider and receiver will pose a conflict and an anxiety related to the possible withdrawal of the strong partner. For instance, many projects of technical cooperation of Sida are of long term duration in practice, but consist of a number of shorter term contracts (Guimarães, Apthorpe, and Valk 2002). In these cases, the (individual and organizational) anxiety of withdrawal functions as a mechanism to try and achieve success with a view of continuing the aid relationship. It takes a strong autonomous local organization (in terms of its relationship with the project) to be able to say no to an ongoing project.

With new projects, involving the first time interaction between consultant and local organization, the balance of initial ownership is often on the side of the consultant. The local organization grows but is guided by the consultant. As discussed above for individual learning, this process has been called 'scaffolding' as initially the new elements do not all fit together to support each other. When the local organization grows stronger, its initiative in and control over project related processes will increase. The balance of power between the consultant and the local organization is put to the test. With the technical knowledge transfer reaching its completion, the local organization will be more in control of its own project and engage in a new project on a more equal footing, expressing stronger ownership with the ability to interact creatively with consultants, also at the initial stages.<sup>17</sup> Inequality in aid projects, also embedded in the notion transfer of knowledge, implies that the local organization absorbs most of the change and is therefore in that sense most inter-active.

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<sup>15</sup> This constitutes a translation of the results of Transaction Analysis to the level of organizations. A possibility that is also discussed in (Steward and Joines 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Menzies (1970) as cited in De Board 1978): 'The needs of members of the organization to use it in the struggle against anxiety leads to the development of socially structured defence mechanisms which appear as elements in the structure, culture and mode of functioning of the organization. A social defence system develops over time as a result of collusive interaction and agreement, often unconscious, between members of the organization as to what form it will take. The socially structured defence mechanisms then tend to become an aspect of external reality with which old and new member of the institution must come to terms.'

<sup>17</sup> These could be interpreted as psychoanalytical metaphors at the level of organizations in terms of awareness of the other, objectivation of the other, and finally subjectivation of the other.

Transfer of learning routines will first occur at the tacit and individual level: interactions between professionals with much implicit learning but little explicit learning coupled with explicit learning in training sessions without organizational storage. At a later stage, second order routines for learning may develop, with training departments, a training programme/policy, training and work manuals and explicit quality standards. Third order routines would imply that the local organization engages in knowledge management and routines on learning how to learn.

Thus, within the organization there are individual learning processes through interactions between individuals (intersubjectivity and tacit learning) and through exposure to more explicit organizational knowledge. The organization learns through learning individuals and through adjusting its routines at various levels. Between organizations involved in aid projects, joint action (inter-activity rather than inter-subjectivity) implies processes of internalization and externalization, differentiated across the participants according to their roles. These processes take place in the context of existing and adapting organizational cultures. Dependencies can develop and anxiety of withdrawal can reduce the autonomy of the local organization. Strong or radical ownership of the project would indicate an autonomous organization, capable of a fair degree of equality in partnerships. Yet, the basic inequality of the aid relationship can never be disguised. Thus, the concept of autonomy appears as the most important characteristic for (whatever is meant by) ownership. Rather than promoting ownership, aid organizations should respect and foster autonomy. This would imply autonomy in setting its own agenda, controlling its financial, physical and human resources and choosing its own development path.

## **5 OWNERSHIP IN PROJECTS: CONCEPTS AND ISSUES<sup>18</sup>**

As referred to above, the intuitive understanding of ownership relates to individual ownership. Translating this concept into its metaphorical use at the organizational level implies defining organizational activities that are similar to those of individuals when practicing ownership. These involve activities directed at control of outcomes towards organizational objectives, monitoring and feedback activities (and systems) to enable the organization to evaluate the

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed analysis of 'ownership' see Guimarães, Apthorpe, and Valk (2002).

implementation of the project, and systematic efforts to absorb the project output. In the case of knowledge, this project output can be absorbed by tacit<sup>19</sup> and explicit learning processes.

In addition, organizational activities derived from a critical stance in the relationship with the aid provider also reflect ownership. For instance, the field work in Botswana, Lithuania and Mozambique revealed instances of a more critical approach: demanding stronger participation in the project evaluation, providing feedback on the conditions under which aid is delivered, challenging or rejecting donor inserted priorities, taking initiatives to change project parameters before or during project implementation.<sup>20</sup>

Aid projects will go through various stages during their planning phase (formulating the initial project idea, developing a preliminary proposal, organizing finance, developing a detailed proposal, approval, tendering for suppliers and consultants, selection of suppliers and consultants) and their implementation phase (organizing inputs, staff training, activities to produce project output, monitoring, transfer, evaluation). These may recursive and not necessarily sequential and the attention given to each stage will depend on the specifics of individual projects. The order can be different particularly in the implementation phase where some of the stages are simultaneous. The various organizations involved play different roles over these phases. In the planning phase, the aid provider is more involved than in the implementation phase, where the local organization and the consultant are most active.

In connection with ownership, a useful distinction can be made between project processes/activities (over various phases in the project cycle), material project inputs/outputs, immaterial project inputs/outputs, and project objectives. Ownership as a sense of responsibility is reflected in processes rather than material inputs/outputs.

For each of these stages, and aspects the ownership question can be asked. Who is the owner: the consultant, the aid provider, or the local organization? Which processes are important and what kind of organizational activities correspond to these forms of ownership? What effect does a particular constellation of ownership of one stage have on ownership in subsequent stages? With knowledge as project output, what are the learning processes in the aid receiving organization?

Ownership of (elements of) projects can be experienced by individuals and can be defined to exist for organizations as well. Organizational activities take place through

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<sup>19</sup> In brief, the term tacit knowledge refers to forms of knowledge that can only be transferred by close interaction between the owner of tacit knowledge and the potential receiver when performing the function for which the knowledge is required (Polanyi 1962).

<sup>20</sup> Unpublished research notes for Guimarães, J, R. Apthorpe and P. de Valk, A. Dobravolskas (2002) and Cuambe, G., A. Lingen, G. Somolekae, and P. de Valk (2002)

individual actions (shaped by their organizational priorities and culture). For example, the leadership role of a ‘project champion’ in the local organization was very important for project success and for and organizational ‘voice’ towards aid providers and consultants (Guimarães, Apthorpe, and Valk 2002).

Individuals may form different alliances than those that exist at the level of organizations. For instance, the fieldwork in Botswana and Mozambique found cases whereby, at the level of the individual, the consultant did indeed identify more strongly with the local organization than with his own organization (Cuambe, G., A. Lingen, G. Somolekae, and P. de Valk 2002). Another example is the case with of the Dutch consultant of SNV (the ‘Dutch Volunteers Organization’) in the Sri Lankan Sarvodaya Shramadana movement who tried to influence an external evaluation (in 1980) strongly in favour of the local organization. As far as the boundaries and alliances between organizations is concerned, this solidarity is much more seldom and often outside the official aid circuit.

In addition, ownership can be shared between individuals and between organizations. Multiple ownership normally implies a distribution mechanisms defining who owns which parts of the object owned or what percentage of the fruits of the object (or asset, in this sense).

Multiple ownership can become co-ownership, particularly in the case of objectives. Co-ownership here means that the full value of ownership by one party can be enjoyed without diluting it for others. Moreover, there is also the possibility that ownership (of output) by one party (the local organization) gives rise to increase in satisfaction for other parties (consultant and aid provider). The most radical form of co-ownership develops when objectives and incentives are identical for cooperating parties as with strong solidarity.

Thus, co-ownership (when it exists) exhibits the characteristics of a public good defined over the three parties. In economics, a particular consumable good is a public good when enjoying a piece of a public good by one consumer does not reduce the availability to other consumers (in-exhaustibility) and it is impossible to exclude individuals from consuming it (non- excludability). An example might be ‘national safety’ provided by government. In a similar way, a private good is defined when only the direct consumer derives satisfaction (utility) from consuming the good and that the consumption of one unit reduces the total availability of the private good exactly by that one unit.<sup>21</sup>

Utility (i.e. satisfaction), in economics is defined as a concept applying to individuals. Even a social welfare function derives total utility of the society from aggregating individual

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<sup>21</sup> Mixed goods are somewhere in between these extremes.



welfares (although not without conceptual problems). To define utility for organizations it must be defined in relation to the fulfilment of organizational objectives. All events and achievements that contribute to reaching the organization's objectives will have a positive impact on the organization's utility.<sup>22</sup>

These economic definitions are challenging when applied to the good 'ownership of project elements'. As argued above, the degree to which ownership can be shared varies between project elements. Therefore, the question as to what type of an 'economic good' ownership is must necessarily be broken down into its components/aspect of ownership as defined in Section 5. Without discussing the whole list some examples in addition to the ones above might be illustrative.

For instance, ownership of management of implementation processes is a more complicated case. Whereas a distribution of management tasks might be useful, ambiguities in and disagreements about management responsibilities may lead to conflicts between local organization and consultant over management control (while still agreeing on the desirability of project success). When both parties attempt to manage the same thing at the same time there is an "exclusion struggle" over management responsibilities and areas. This implies that good management is perceived to involve excludability. Yet, when actual management practice is an arena of disagreement, its solution in terms of settling on one party as the main responsible agency will affect the utility of each parties whatever outcome there will be. Ownership of management processes cannot become co-ownership and is thus not a public good in the economic sense. But neither is it a private good, since the ownership of management by one party cannot fully exclude the other party from participating without sacrificing project success at a higher level. Thus ownership of management processes cannot easily be categorized within this economist framework, revealing both the complexities of the concept of ownership of processes and the limitations of the economists' definition of public goods.

Ownership of the knowledge output is a different matter again. First of all, knowledge in the abstract is not a pure public good since it is not accessible to all when its complexity requires training and prior knowledge. Yet appropriating knowledge does not reduce the total amount of abstract knowledge. In the relation between consultant and local organization, the consultant is the initial owner, both in the sense of being the source of abstract knowledge as well as having appropriated the knowledge within its organization. Transferring the

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<sup>22</sup> In that sense it differs from a national utility function which is assumed to be derived from aggregating individual utilities.

knowledge does not deduct from the knowledge of the consultant, or for that matter from the abstract knowledge pool. The new owners of the knowledge have exclusive control over their own appropriated knowledge. In its turn, this very fact may lead to increase in utility for the aid provider and the consultant (which of course is different from the utility of the knowledge itself).

Moving beyond ownership to concepts like partnerships, commitment, inter-activity and intersubjectivity the limitations of the individualistic definition of public and private goods and their linkage to utility becomes apparent. Goods such as these are jointly produced and jointly consumed. They do not even exist separately for single consumers.

Thus these economic concepts have sharpened the discussion but they do not seem to be adequate to capture the full picture.<sup>23</sup> Ownership in some cases (e.g. objectives) can be shared ownership, or co-ownership; in other cases (e.g. management of implementation by the consultant) ownership is more exclusive, although this may not necessarily infringe on the possibility of local ownership at later stages or project outputs. Ownership when challenged in cases of exclusivity will lead to conflict, but again, the effects of conflict are not always detrimental to project success, ownership of the final output, and ownership of market institutions (managing the consultant) in later projects.

## **6 PERCEPTIONS ON AID AND LOCAL OWNERSHIP<sup>24</sup>**

Having laid the conceptual groundwork for analysing local ownership in aid projects, the discussion can now turn to complexities that arise from different perspectives on aid in relation to local ownership.<sup>25</sup>

### **The ethical perspective: aid as commitment**

The first complexity arising from perspectives is discussed as an ‘ethical paradox’. Many aid workers will be motivated by ethical principles such as human equality and self determination. However, given the prevailing inequalities between the various parties involved in aid projects, these principles of become problematic. Yet, in the aid relationship they are the ones commanding the resources, powers and opportunities to do something about

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<sup>23</sup> The argument that the economic concepts have been applied outside their intended field of application does not hold since, clearly, the items discussed all affect utility for the parties involved.

<sup>24</sup> Other perspectives and labels are possible: for example, the ‘pragmatic perspective’ emphasizing ownership as instrument (coming close to the incentives perspective) and the ‘cynical perspective’ viewing the ethical perspective in particular as paternalistic, the pragmatic/incentives view as naïve, and leaning perhaps towards the ‘aid as trade perspective’.

<sup>25</sup> See Carr, McAuliffe and MacLachlan (1998) for a detailed discussion of psychological aspects of aid, including the impact of inequalities in aid and the views of those receiving aid.

it. Without this, aid would not be feasible and inequality of some kind is thus essential for aid. This means that the aid relationship itself, in its essence, is an expression of inequality, in contradiction with its ethical motivations. Of course the ethical intentions are to do something about that, but in the actual practice of doing, the glaring inequalities coupled with all the problems in achieving success cast doubts on the possibilities to achieve these ethical objectives and, in the end, on the ethical purity of the intervention itself.

The individual (psychological/theoretical) ethical answer is found by formulating partnership and local ownership as starting points of engaging in aid relationships. But not only do intentions differ from practice, self-reflecting individuals can also engage in critical analysis of their own motivations. For instance, comparing the living conditions of the aid provider and the aid receivers, might lead the ethical aid provider to cast doubts about the depth of his/her ethical motivation, while at the same time understanding his/her psychological need for ethical discourse. In this way, a struggle can develop between the ethical intentions at one psychological level and its cognition, leading to doubt about these intentions at another psychological level. Thus, notions such as partnership and local ownership become problematic even with their ethical proponents. With cultural differences between donors and receivers, these problems will only increase as the vast literature on hermeneutics testifies. Some understand these processes as double hermeneutics: interpreting others who are also interpreting themselves.<sup>26</sup> But also the latter interpret the former: a two way double hermeneutic process. For instance, some aid receivers will understand that the ethical discourse of the aid provider is the uneasy outcome of the psychological conflict between ethical concerns and the realities of inequality. And the aid provider can be aware of that understanding too.

Yet, despite the adverse conditions of ambiguous, multi-level objectives of aid and unequal power relations between the providers and receivers of aid, intentions to enhance local ownership can be genuine expressions of commitment at individual as well as organizational level, commitment based on (partial) identification and (partial) understanding of receivers of aid: inter-subjective and intercultural awareness. Habermas (1981) argues that true dialogue is possible between individuals (and therefore individuals embedded in different organizations and cultures). Theories within feminist psychoanalysis, analyzing the developing relations between mother and child, establish for the creation of the human facility

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<sup>26</sup> Hermeneutics can be understood as the art of transfer of meanings between different interpretive systems. Self-reflecting individuals transfer meaning between their immediate interpretive system and their conscious, rational interpretive system.

of inter-subjectivity in moments of joint recognition of the other.<sup>27</sup> Inter-subjectivity embedded in commitment at the individual level gives rise to trans-subjective border zones of (temporary and partial) recognition. Thus, at best, the possibility of commitment to ownership and partnership does exist as a joint experience between providers and receivers of aid but is never complete and full-time sustained. This experience may continue to act for a while as individual motivation for continued commitment. At worst, real life pragmatic demands, realities of aid and non-aid practice, diverging cultures and part-time interaction cooperate to overshadow commitment in the search for partnership and local ownership.

Wanting the other to become a subject (partner/owner) in the aid relationship can be interpreted as a desire to enter into a subject-subject relationship where the aid relationship (perceived as unequal) has made it into a subject-object relationship. Why? Is it guilt? Is it an adult facility for recognition under the safe condition of being the one with power? Like a parent over a child, without the need to fully compromise the absolute self, thereby solving the paradox that consist of the conflict between the asserting the self and the need for others to obtain recognition? Yet precisely this desire for local ownership and partnership, when imposed and conditioned, is an expression of the subject-object relationship.

Thus, at the receiving end, local organizations and their employees find themselves doing their work in an increasingly global and competitive environment, yet lacking competitive strength, know how and physical resources to reach levels of efficiency and competence prevailing in richer countries. Also receiving aid involves an ethical paradox: how to accept aid without losing dignity? Aid brings benefits to the organization and its employees. Yet, for an individual, receiving aid does not feel good because of the dependent position it creates. People prefer resources at their command. Employees in aid receiving organizations are just doing their work and do not necessarily feel obliged. Recourse can be taken to viewing aid as a right, an entitlement, for the sake of social justice. Alternatively, aid can be viewed as an exchange of resources for influence or even moral satisfaction: 'aid as trade' (rather than 'aid or trade'). But aid taken for granted can upset the donor, despite ownership rhetoric (as also hinted at in footnote 27). Radical ownership of a project by an autonomous local organization would reduce the aid provider role as (unequal) partner. While, ironically, this is the ultimate goal of development cooperation, it would instil withdrawal anxiety within the donor organization.

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<sup>27</sup> See Jessica Benjamin (1993). Where inter-subjectivity is a creative act vindicating objectivation and aggression, for some, also in the world of aid, the ongoing psychological struggle for meaning and sense is directed at aid receivers as objects, temporarily fulfilling the psychological need of meaning. Disappointments in terms of lack of reciprocity may lead back via disillusion into aggression.

In the reality of aid clashes between ethical perspectives may occur. When for example aid is provided with strings attached such as those relating to environment and good governance, this can lead to mistrust because an ethical perspective of aid is maintained by the provider and assumed for the other party as well, while at the same time furthering the providers priorities as derived from an ethics not necessarily shared by the receiving party.

Aid practice tries to manoeuvre around these roadblocks. Tackling them, incorporating or adjusting to them, sometimes only recognizing them. Planning and management practices are adopted, for better or worse, using logical frameworks, sector-wide approaches, donor coordination, and other technical tools. From a more ethical perspective, partnerships are assumed, trust and confidence claimed, ownership created.

### **The bureaucratic perspective: aid as job**

More complexities in perspectives arise under the label of ‘the aid complex’. Taken together, a great variety of motivations, activities, organizations and individuals constitute the ‘aid complex’. The argument is that firstly aid has become institutionalized, professionalized and bureaucratized. Secondly and partly caused by this, aid creates dependencies not only by supporting and sustaining institutions and bureaucracies but also by interfering with the problems that aid is supposed to solve, sometimes aggravating the problem. Thirdly, related to the ‘ethical paradox’ the question can be posed whether aiding people in need is an ethical achievement or whether aid-givers are just doing their normal duty? Is it an ethical right of those in need and can they demand assistance (as is already the case for aid related to the activities of the International Committee of the Red Cross or the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), mandated by international law)? Generally, the duty to provide aid and the entitlement to receive aid right meets no objection when conditioned by “on ethical grounds”. Yet when put in practice the strength of this perception evaporates. Rights and entitlements become favours. Professionalization easily leads to bureaucratization; and competence replaces commitment.

With institutionalization of aid meanings of important concepts transform into their bureaucratic equivalents. Words such as partnership, ownership, commitment, compassion and friendship are inadequate labels only partially indicating and thereby revoking a feeling or an experience. Philosophers and social scientist analyze and refine these concepts breaking them down into their core meaning and its possible variations, their practical use, and the behavioural aspects related to these concepts. So far no harm is done. Harm is done when these concepts are developed and taken over by planners and managers and become tools for

development interventions. Their original relation to feelings and experiences are now replaced by instrumental and logical calculations arguing from cause to effect. These concepts are now captured by guidelines and procedures, checklists and matrices. Partnership matrices already exist.<sup>28</sup> Within the world of project aid and its planning these words now recreate themselves into new but surrogate behaviour: as-if partners, as-if commitment, as-if ownership. Thus the removal of meaning and its subsequent transformation takes place in four steps: (1) from feeling or experience to meaningful (still evoking original feelings experience) words, (2) from meaningful words to logical (intellectually correct) words, (3) from logical words to instrumental concepts), (4) from instrumental concepts to surrogate behaviour.<sup>29</sup> This type of organizational surrogate behaviour finds its parallel in what is described in Transaction Analysis as ‘games’ between individuals leading to substitute feelings (‘racket’ feelings) as opposed to genuine feelings (Steward and Joines 1987), and the opposite of true dialogue (Habermas 1981). But surrogate behaviour is real enough with regard to the dynamics in a bureaucratic environment, yet surrogate when related to original meanings. For example, Makhoul and Harrison (2002) show how the (male) elites in Lebanon are successful in capturing the relationship with NGOs by using the same planning language. However, they use this relationship for different (political) ends. Griffiths (2003) discusses in his case study on Sierra Leone how also private consultants adjust their message to different situations (what he calls ‘private spaces’) guided by their own personal interests.

These four steps do not necessarily lead to their potential logical consequence of surrogate behaviour. Commitment will infuse the instrumental concepts with the right content so that step four would consist of passionate behaviour guided by logical instruments. Instruments now make sense, are complemented and adjusted when they do not lead to desired results. Genuine partnerships can be established, not through partnership matrices, but through personal integrity, friendship and commitment.

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<sup>28</sup> Surely, commitment and friendship matrices must be already on the drawing board.

<sup>29</sup> The term ‘surrogate behaviour’ is used to describe actions that are undertaken for receiving the incentives attached to them but not for the results the actions were designed and planned for. Gasper (2000) discusses how this can lead to indicator fetishism in project planning. Surrogate behaviour is typical in larger organizations and a well described phenomenon within public administrations, although without dubbing the term as such (Schaffer 1984, Valk 1986). Schaffer (1984: 143) points at the lack of accountability and liability in the public sector employing the ‘common sense’ view of a separation between planning, sectors and implementation. Policy making (and planning) is perceived as a sector in itself. Better integration of planning, sectors and implementation through for example the logical framework approach have not eliminated the accountability problem. Schaffer (1977) has summarized the inherent contradiction between responsibility and bureaucracy using the label ‘official providers’ for civil servants.

On the side of local organizations, responses may develop that sustain the surrogate behaviour. The concerns that local organizations are not the drivers of ‘their’ projects, yet are supposed to be the main agent for sustaining the project results are largely voiced by the aid giving organizations. From the view of local organizations another view on the same issue could be imagined with expectations and behaviour shaped by economic inequalities, colonial history and current practices of arrogance within the context of racial and cultural differences. Aid becomes one of the facts of life to be used for one’s own advantage. The practice of aid management becomes one of donor management, e.g. how to manage the donor. Ownership and partnership obtain instrumental rather than fundamental value. The elements of the aid transfer considered useful are taken on board pursued and sustained, while fulfilling only the necessary conditions determined by the donor. If the donor wants ownership, the rituals will be initiated and played out without, however, the ‘true’ commitment for and ownership of the donor’s objectives. There is of course always ownership, almost by definition, by local organizations and individuals, but naturally only for own objectives.

In this manner, aid recipients arrive through a different route at the same surrogate behaviour as planners and managers, thereby creating a stable mutually reinforcing situation of sustainable surrogate behaviour. The difference however is that this occurs in an unequal situation. For the recipient, the surrogate behaviour is a rational response to the idiosyncrasy of the donor community, even when a true commitment to solve their own problems exists. Merely adopting the language and go through the rituals of ownership, partnership, empowerment and the like will assist in obtaining funds and other assistance to pursue their own objectives.

This rational surrogate behaviour must be distinguished from ‘genuine’ bureaucratic surrogate behaviour when also recipient organizations become ‘professionalized’ just as the planners and managers in donor organizations and arrive at bureaucratic surrogate behaviour similar to that of (some of the) donors. When that happens, local NGOs face similar challenges in solving problems of others.

Thus, firstly, professionalization and bureaucratization can lead to sustainable surrogate language and behaviour on the side of donors and aid recipients. The use of surrogate language can backfire, because despite the ethical rhetoric cooperating partners in aid projects are not equal, they have access to different resources and they have different motivations to take on the project. Ignoring these differences will lead to project failures. This implies the need to recognize the reality of multiple ownership of projects, which is discussed in more detail below.

Secondly, in the aid context, cooperation is as a rule between parties from different cultural contexts, leading to higher potential for misunderstanding. The uncritical adoption of cultural meanings typical for bureaucratic discourse will only add to more confusion. For instance, the concept of ownership of land is different in western individualistic cultures as compared to many African cultures where communal ownership (still) plays a role in securing access to land, even in formal legal proceedings (Donge and Pherani 1999). Adopting agricultural strategies assuming efficient land markets are bound to go astray. True professional dialogue between genuine partners would reveal such incongruence and allow for cross-cultural learning.

Thirdly, with regard to the ownership question, the conclusion must be that in the bureaucratic exchange and discourse only the elements of the project that correspond to the priorities of both the providing and receiving organizations and individuals will be emphasized. Ownership cannot be caused but must be selected either as existing priorities or as potential priorities. But not all objectives that are locally owned are necessarily desirable for the donors' perspective. A donor-driven selection of project objectives that will be locally owned (from amongst other locally owned objectives) further strengthens donor priorities.

### **The incentives perspective: multiple owners**

The particular constellation of actors (local organization, consultant, donor) discussed here is a reduced form of a much more complex set of relationships. Ostrom (2001) argues that 'development cooperation is a process involving eight major actors', forming the international development cooperation octangle. While this may be generally the case, in actual practice the number and types of organizations vary. For instance, the Ministry of Planning (or its equivalent) was an important actor in Botswana and Mozambique (Cuambe and others 2002), but is not included in the octangle. Also across the whole project life the more limited number of institutions on which this paper focuses is most active, a fact also acknowledged by Ostrom (ibid.). Her detailed analysis of incentives and their interactions in the spirit of institutional economics, applies concepts of asymmetric information and motivation to assess the impact of ownership on sustainability. Ostrom treats ownership as the degree of control experienced and responsibility felt by the local organization. Guimarães, Apthorpe and Valk (2002) argue that also the consultant has a sense of ownership (and control) of the project, whereas the donor remains the distant principal, able to control the project through various means even while advocating local ownership as its development philosophy. Multiple ownership is the



rule in cooperation projects also in Ostrom (2001)'s case studies: all have incentives to do the project, with different emphasis placed on components and aspects.

When an individual organization initiates a project, ownership is no problem and largely a legal matter. When organizations cooperate ownership takes on different dimensions. Even with clear legal arrangements a struggle may develop over the manner in which ownership is distributed over the participating organizations or individuals (incomplete contracts). But this is a fight for more ownership rather than an indication of the lack of it.

Then, what is the problem? Aid projects have a low success rate and are plagued by a large number of problems in various phases of the projects. Amongst them, sustainability of project results is a major one, when even projects that were successfully implemented do not survive the transfer to normal routine, beyond the period with the specific project status. The first line of explanation is that the local organization does not sustain the project results. However, the more fundamental explanation of the difference between the for-profit sector and aid projects must be found in the specific form of cooperation in the context of aid projects, allowing for different ownership relations.

With aid, parties/roles similar to those in the private sector can be identified in defining and implementing projects: the donor/financier, the contractor/technical consultant, and the organization for which the project output is intended. However, in the for-profit sector market mechanisms exist to coordinate the activities of the parties.

In the aid context the attention for explaining the differences must therefore shift towards the type of incentives and forms of motivation that shape the dynamics of the interaction between these parties. In essence, the core of the problem is that parties other than the local organization define and control what is best for the local organization. That is the big difference between the aid context and the private sector context. Changing the incentives system to simulate private market mechanisms does not fundamentally alter this difference.

The aid sector has developed into a network of dependencies. Aid providing organizations need to provide aid. Private sector organizations in both donor and recipient countries have developed to accommodate this aid-financed part of the market. Networks of national and international NGOs channel the finance and motivations for 'helping the other' towards their destinations. In the process of organizational development, dependencies grow on either side, making aiding and recipient organizations/individuals more self interested and (aid-) market oriented. Projects become supply driven, both by the need to have projects as well as by the assumption of knowing 'what is good for them' (as well as for themselves): an

awkward mixture of self-interest, paternalism, and genuine ethical concerns, in various degrees and combinations expressed and hidden at individual and organizational levels.

The end-result is that project will have multiple owners, each of whom will pull the project into the direction of its own objectives, which often and ironically include the perceived objectives of the local organization. This multiplicity is of a complex variety involving organizations and individuals in networks of sometimes contradicting interests, objectives and intentions embedded in a context where good intentions can turn out as bad intentions (as in paternalism) and so-perceived bad intentions (in the limited sense of not being aid-driven) can have good consequences (where profit making consultants deliver good results). Different value systems inform the parties on what is good and bad in terms of goals and priorities, rules of behaviour and work attitudes.

With multiple ownership identified as the problem, a greater degree of local ownership is seen as solution. When seriously appreciating multiple ownership as a matter of fact, it becomes possible to study the conditions, forms and types of aid delivery that would reduce the potential for conflict between the objectives of the various parties with regard to the project and/or shift the balance of power and ownership towards the local organization. The problem and its solution, is thus placed with the nature and modalities of aid delivery.

While ownership of an aid project as a whole always involves multiple ownership (at best in the form of co-ownership), ownership at the level of project elements (inputs, activities, outputs) and phases (e.g. identification, implementation, completion, evaluation) stretches along a continuum of co-ownership to ownership of project elements dominated or even exclusively owned by one party (as some of the donor conditions are). Local organizations will dis-own imposed elements and withdraw into surrogate behaviour (or other forms of 'partial exit') if these cannot be rejected outright.

### **The rational expectations perspective: aid as trade**

The rational expectations perspective, one of the pillars of neoclassical economy, would analyse aid from the assumption of optimizing individuals in a given institutional context. Aid providers operate within their own political and institutional environment. For instance, Swedish aid to the Baltic States is inspired concerns about the regional environment and political stability (Guimarães, Apthorpe, Valk, and Dobravolskas 2002) whereas aid to Botswana was given to with a view to strengthening its position as a front-line state against the apartheid regime in South Africa (Cuambe and others 2002). Also receivers of aid will have wider political objectives for aid in general and specific projects in particular (Martens,

Mummert, Murell and Seabright 2002). Some consultants will be motivated by profit, while others have to respond to the demands of their supporters as in the case of international NGOs. A large power corporation in Southern Africa viewed aid as one possible source of finance, amongst others, to be used only after carefully considering its costs (donor conditions and procedures) and benefits in relation to other sources of finance. In fact, they preferred the financial market because they did not have to feel dependent on benevolence.<sup>30</sup>

The rational expectation assumption comes in two forms: a meaningful form and a tautological form. The tautological form poses that ex post behaviour can be explained as if decisions guiding the behaviour were guided by rational utility maximization. Of course, this has to be true. If by definition (however hard the practical specification might be) all causes are included in a utility function the tautology becomes obvious: a theory it must necessarily be correct if all causes are included. The more meaningful and therefore more debatable form of rational expectations is formulated by restricting the explanation to certain causes, which in economics are then often reduced to identifiable, quantifiable and value-able causes. This economist reduction is not necessary for the present purpose, since immaterial benefits can also enter the calculations of utility maximizers in a less quantified application of rational expectations.

In this perspective then, aid is given for a return. Aid is trade and exchange. The benefits of aid providers include political influence and strategic advantages; economic concessions; national and global environmental concerns; organizational survival, particular interest groups such as children and women rights, religion and churches, and animal rights, and moral satisfaction and ethical motivation. Different levels and segments in the aid sector will obtain different combinations of benefits. For example, many aid providing organizations will not be motivated by strategic and political concerns, whereas foreign ministries and their development aid departments usually do. Various aid agendas, also of lower level aid organizations are influenced by higher level strategic use of 'generally good' principles such as good governance, human rights, irrespective of their intrinsic value.

From the same point of view, aid receiving organizations will use their positions to obtain the best deal for their problems: cost effective provision of goods and services; access to markets; individual benefits such as training, travel and related income. Often, having a project status enhances the standing of a department in an organization just as organizations

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<sup>30</sup> Interviews for own fieldwork (2002)

with important aid projects gain status in the overall public system. This can result in more power and resources for the organizations involved.

Thus, in this perspective, ownership of personal and organizational benefits is important. This is a concern for ownership over outputs rather than processes. And where ownership and control of processes gain importance, this will be explained in terms of their influence over obtaining the final benefits. Tokens of ownership and partnership, when they are a concern of aid providers, can be provided and traded for ownership of benefits. As long as the benefits are there, the ownership and partnership rituals will be played as was discussed under surrogate behaviour.

### Competing perspectives?

The reality of aid practice does not fit exclusively in one of the above categories and mixed modes of understanding must prevail. In the sense of their descriptive power these perspectives are not competitive but complementary. This paper has adopted a meta-perspective by comparing and analysing these four perspectives. This becomes the fifth perspective: *the critical perspective*.

As a summary, the table below shows the relation between perspective, main concept, theoretical field, and aspects of ownership and the predominant level of power addressed (one: level of resource; two: level of structures; three: level of discourse), explicit as part of approach or hidden as revealed by critical analysis.

**Table 1: Aid perspective, main concept, theoretical background and relation to ownership**

Perspective	Concept	Field of theory	Ownership outcome	Power
Ethical	Inter-subjectivity	Feminist sociology; psychology; ethics	Genuine ownership but seldom achieved (solidarity)	Explicit: one and two Hidden: three
Rational expectations	Exchange	Neoclassical economics	Partial ownership of outputs; other aspects irrelevant or coincidental	Explicit: one Hidden: two and three
Bureaucratic	Bureaucratic behaviour	Normative planning	Surrogate ownership	Explicit: none Hidden: level, one to and three
Incentive	Incentives	Institutional economics	Multiple ownership	Explicit: one and two Hidden: three
Critical	Meta-analysis	Critical discourse analysis	Genuine ownership; true dialogue	Explicit: one, two and three

Below four cases of interaction between perspectives are given. For instance, the ethical perspective may lead to a bureaucratic perspective when the ethical discourse becomes dominant and part and parcel of procedures and expectations. The example given earlier of

Bangladesh (where NGOs assumed leadership in the ethical development discourse) also showed how these NGOs became bureaucratized and lost touch with their grass roots (Feldman 2003).

Interaction between ethical and rational expectations perspectives occurred in the example given of the Power Corporation in Southern Africa in relation to the donor (in the section on rational expectations). Where the two organizations interact in an unequal relation the resource-rich person/party will emphasize externalization processes attempting to create intersubjectivity while the resource-scarce person/party will shift through internalization to objectivation of the resource rich party in the organizational culture. Thus where one party looks for partnerships and local ownership, the other will attempt to establish psychological independence and autonomy by calling on the 'aid as trade' perspective.

Multiple ownership in a quasi-market environment calls upon elements of rational expectations and related neoclassical economic perspectives. Yet the aid market is essentially a quasi-market. Multiple ownership can only evolve into co-ownership when trust is created by establishing a positively interpreted inter-organizational reality. Yet, even with good intentions based on underlying value systems on the side of the aid provider with regard to establishing, or expanding the role of, local ownership (a *tour de force* governed by contradictions of inequality and one-sidedness), it remains an elusive ideal when the other parties (consultant and aid receiver) are not committed to develop a sense of co-ownership (including the accompanying experience of trust and inter-subjectivity), given the reality of multiple ownership. Thus the rational expectations perspective has to be complemented with the ethical view.

Finally, in actual aid practice and related normative discourse, the perspectives can be rather conflicting. At the individual level, development workers and their partners are often bewildered in their daily practice by conflicting perspectives and attitudes as compared to their own expectations. The individual perspective (of employees) can be different from perspectives applicable to the organizational level and national political perspectives. Using the example of the British NGO 'Intermediate Technology', Crewe and Harrison (1998) point out that 'it is rarely recognized by donors that their relationship with clients cannot be a meeting of equals'. Thus when problems occur in the cooperation, the failure to understand these perspectives in their significance for the underlying inequality leads development workers to look for explanations in the wrong direction such as in the field of planning and design.

Amongst these normative views, the view taken in this paper is that a judicious and selective combination of the market perspective with the commitment perspective, guided by the pragmatic views of the incentives paradigm of institutional economics, might lead to an environment where local ownership can survive (rather than develop).

## **7 TOWARDS AUTONOMY**

This long review of various aspects of the ownership has exposed the limitations of ownership as a concept. Not only does it mean different things from different perspectives, but most importantly it is a psychological concept that cannot easily be transferred to an organizational concept. Moreover, ownership is not a fundamental concept in the sense that it derives from the more meaningful concept of autonomy (as referred to in Section 6). By implication and nearly tautologically, an autonomous organization will own its own projects. Analyzing the degree of autonomy in making decisions on specific (elements of) projects will shed light on whether project implementation will be sustained and in which manner.

Autonomy can be defined as the ability to make choices in significant matters (Gasper and Castillo 2009). There are two aspects to autonomy, the first relates to responsibility, the second to effectiveness. With regard to the first aspect, in existential psychology the desire for autonomy stands in contrast to the desire for (re)union (Otto Rank 2004). In mature personalities the latter translates into independence (e.g. autonomy) in the context of social relations (e.g. union). Rollo May (1979) speaks of the desire for freedom together with responsibility. This can be understood as relationships towards (elements of) the self as well to the outside world. This first aspect of autonomy might be called responsible autonomy.

With regard to the second aspect, autonomy as defined above and seen in relation to the outside world also implies the existence of agency (internal capability) and an external environment that provides the potential to exercise agency, taken together labelled as qualified effective agency (Gasper and Castillo 2009).

Combined, the two aspects of autonomy could be described as effective and responsible autonomy.

Autonomy is a continuous concept. One can speak of the degree of autonomy to the extent that significant matters can be effectively and responsibly dealt with. This implies that processes towards increasing autonomy can become visible.

Autonomy as seen in relation to the outside world is visible in terms of what decision are made and put in practice and how these relate to the environment. While this behavioural view of autonomy is the outcome of the underlying state of affairs, it can form the basis for

measurement. In addition, with this behavioural view in mind the concept of autonomy can now easily be transferred from the individual and his/her environment towards the organizational level. This common framework will have the additional advantage of being able to investigate the relation between autonomy of an organization, the autonomy of the persons inside and outside the organization.

At the level of organizations this concept can be operationalized in terms of agency, responsibility in terms of organizational goals and internal processes, budgetary control, degree of financial independence, etc. When used by outsiders (e.g. donors), the emphasis on responsibility for internal processes can reduce autonomy when this sense of responsibility is not shared between the cultural contexts of foreign donor and local organization. Thus, these conflicting views may impact on the autonomy because of the power dimensions of the aid relationship. In development cooperation individual and organizational autonomy can be taken as a long term objective and evaluation criterion (ibid.).

In short and in contrast to ‘ownership’, ‘autonomy’ is a meaningful concept that can be used for individuals and organizations; it can be operationalized; it has a strong footing in psychology as well as organizational literature (Brock 2003); and it can be linked to individual and organizational responsibility.

## **8 CONCLUSIONS**

The main conclusions of this paper are first that ownership in aid projects must be understood as a relationship between the organizations. In the context of aid, this relationship will involve (unequal) relations of power. Ownership is thus a matter of degree (metaphorically as the degree of responsibility, and more concretely as the degree of control), may take different forms and can become a form of co-ownership, approaching the concept of participation. Second, the concept of organizational ownership is a metaphor drawing its intuitive meaning from the concept appropriate to individuals. Third, to give operational meaning to the metaphor, ownership must be assessed in the practice of organizational interaction. Since organizations act to a large extent through their employees, the outcomes in terms of control over project elements is shaped by organizational and individual priorities and motivations. Fourth, given that in actual practice organizational ownership and individual ownership co-exist, the paper has analysed differences between abstract organizational ownership and individual ownership in terms of the psychological processes underlying individual ownership and their absence for organizations. Fifth, given the complexities in its definition, meanings and uses, this paper proposed to replace ‘ownership’ by ‘autonomy’. This is a much more

straightforward concept that has a strong theoretical grounding and can be operationalized at the level of the individual and the organization.

These conclusions were reviewed in the light of different perspectives on aid and local ownership: ethical, bureaucratic, incentives and rational expectations. In practice all of these assert their influence in various combinations in different aid forms and individually, in different circumstances and at different moments in time.

The meta-view developed in this paper constitutes a *critical perspective*, the fifth perspective of this paper. It has outlined different positions and motivations as they exist in the aid complex. More perspectives will be possible, complementing and cross-cutting the perspectives selected. As a meta-perspective, it is open to adjustments from peers. This critical reflection will allow the players in the field to position themselves and perhaps engage in a true dialogue based on their real interests as experienced by themselves.

At the individual level, development workers and their partners are often bewildered in their daily practice by conflicting perspectives and attitudes as compared to their own expectations. Individual perspective (of employees) can be different from perspectives applicable to the organizational level and national political perspectives. To be able to apply this critical perspective will help in understanding the complexities of real life and assist in developing committed professionalism.

The paragraphs below will detail the different forms of ownership noted in the first conclusion above and draw out some general implications of this paper.

Different realizations of ownership were noted: radical ownership, multiple ownership, co-ownership, surrogate ownership, no ownership. Each of these notions has its association (the term ‘association’ is used to avoid the impression that these are absolute categories and relations) with the perspectives reviewed, the manner in which the aid provider and the consultant are perceived. As a summary of the argument, the following overview of associations is provided:

- (a) For *radical ownership* (completely in charge of own projects), the rational perspective of aid is the most appropriate association. Aid is judged on what it offers and compared to other sources of finance. The donor is not seen as a partner, implying a process of objectivation of the donor.
- (b) *Multiple ownership* (with all parties involved having a degree of ownership), was discussed under the incentive perspective. This is the rule in aid projects, but the particular form multiple ownership takes will influence the outcome. This is discussed under (c) – (f).



- (c) When *multiple ownership* takes the form of *co-ownership*, good cooperation is possible because of shared interests (even from different incentives structures). Parties will perceive each other as useful and/or necessary for achieving their own objectives. No ethical perspective of any party is required to make this work. Yet, neither is the latter perspective is excluded or necessarily absent.
- (d) *Co-ownership* can be the basis for developing longer term *genuine partnerships*. In principle, these partnerships can be genuine in the sense that the aid receiver is not overpowered by the dominant discourse but intersubjectivity develops in terms of an exchange of views and ideas, leading to a shared perception of the cooperation. *Radical co-ownership* is achieved with strong *solidarity* (implying the identical objectives and incentives for the two parties). The partner is no longer an object in the perception of the other but a subject in the relationship. Elements of the ethical perspective will have to be present in the aid provider and consultant as a motivating factor.
- (e) *Co-ownership* can also exist when the *dominant discourse is internalized*. However, whether this adoption is real or not cannot be ascertained by an observer. This would imply knowledge of ‘real interests’, the impossibility of which was pointed out by critics to Lucas’ definition of the third level of power. The perspective of incentives will be complemented by the ethical perspective in so far this is part of the dominant discourse.
- (f) *Multiple ownership without co-ownership* will lead, almost by definition, to conflicts between parties and problems in at least some of the various project phases and can lead to the final case discussed below of no ownership at all. Aid will reveal all possible negative repercussions. If a project continues, there individual motives of various participants must be strong, since the aid project by itself will certainly fail.
- (g) In the bureaucratic perspective, *surrogate ownership* would be the likely outcome. The (bureaucratic) party will not really be responsible for the project and will undertake the project for different reasons than officially documented. When the aid receiver is the bureaucratic party, aid is taken for granted in the true sense of the words.
- (h) Finally it is also possible that there is *no ownership* by the local organization at all. Consultant and/or donor may imagine partnership convinced by their own ethical perspective. Aid provider and/or consultant (or other parties involved) will be in control. The aid receiver is overpowered (but not convinced) by the dominant

discourse in a neo-colonial aid relationship. The 'exit' option is the only one that prevails.

Some of the implications are as follows. First, the paper emphasized that attitudes towards ownership in the aid relationship are not identical between the aid provider, consultant and the aid receiver at both individual and organizational level. Statements about partnerships and co-ownership must be qualified with reference to this inequality. This might lead to partners engaging in true dialogue and more realistic expectations. Without this, the otherwise ethical considerations will remain in the realm of wishful thinking, perhaps fulfilling a psychological requirement to sooth the impact of the aid paradox.

Second, trying to add donor priorities to the list of core priorities of the local organization will prove counter-effective not only for the particular objective itself but even for co-ownership of core objectives. Such priorities will not be sustainable independently from continued donor insistence, leaving them without local ownership leading to surrogate behaviour. The room for manoeuvre in this respect is constrained by the degree to which donor agencies and their employees have to respond to concerns of their own political environment and other motivations.

Third, the organizational form of the aid agency and the consultant should emphasize higher order learning processes found in more innovative organizations rather than relying in routine management typical for bureaucracies. A typical outcome of aid as profession is the bureaucratization of aid processes leading to sustained surrogate behaviour *vis-à-vis* issues for both aid provider and aid receiver, although for different reasons.

Fourth, interactions between professionals (of the consultant organization and local organization) tend to focus more easily on commitment to quality in the transfer of knowledge and skills. A common professional language facilitates communication across cultures.

Fifth, at the more theoretical level, the paper has argued that a shift of the local organization towards self assertion ('psychological' internalization in the unequal aid relationship) leads to objectivation of the aid provider and the appropriation of resources. This could be argued to be precisely the intended outcome. Yet the appropriation of resources may be ownership alright, but not necessarily as intended by the aid provider. When, in addition, at side of the aid provider additional demands are made, donor inspired conditions are set and bureaucratic tendencies prevail, little will be left over from shared inter-subjectivity between individual participants and shared priorities at the organizational level. Aid becomes a possible resource amongst others. Thus the intended empowerment through local ownership takes an unexpected turn away from partnership, towards objectivation of aid itself as a

resource available for the aid receiver. This would be a strong argument not to set donor conditions according to donor priorities, to avoid bureaucratization, and to emphasize commitment when trying to establish local ownership in an atmosphere of partnership, without however guaranteed outcomes.

Sixth, also in a theoretical sense, 'aid' and 'ownership' cannot be taken for granted, given the complexities in concepts, contexts and perceptions. In practice, aid is not taken for granted most of the time, while in some cases it is. However, aid can never be taken as granted, since official aid with its bureaucratic requirements and its socio-political embedding is never unconditionally provided. Within this limiting environment, people (and their organizations) are capable of ethical inspiration beyond and separate from rational self-interest as argued by feminist psychoanalysis. This emphasis on ethical commitment of aid provider, consultant and local organization requires honesty about motivation and can lead to true dialogue.

Finally, this paper proposed to replace the concern with local ownership by a concern for local autonomy. Local autonomy is more easily operationalised in terms of setting organizational and project goals, control over financial, physical and human resources, and the choices made over the longer term development path of the organization. Respecting and fostering local autonomy is an essential ethical component of development cooperation.

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