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Foreign Aid and National Ownership in Mali and Ghana

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Abstract This article examines the principle of ownership, the keystone of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, and its application to the cases of Mali and Ghana. It argues that both countries are characterized by a high level of ownership in its formal sense, that is to say, both have developed their own development plans, rather than having them imposed from outside. However, substantively, ownership is severely hampered by the existence of multiple plans, with no clear hierarchy among them, and a similar lack of prioritization within plans, as well as serious deficiencies in translating those plans into action. These limitations to the concept of ownership are best understood, not due to a lack of capacity or a simple lack of will per se, but as a result of interests and incentives, notably to maximize donor funding. As a result, the impact of the Aid Effectiveness Agenda on ownership practices in Mali and Ghana has been far more in form than in substance.

Keywords: foreign aid; aid effectiveness; ownership; Ghana; Mali

In 2005, foreign aid donors and recipients formally endorsed a few basic but far-reaching principles that had the potential to transform global development cooperation. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness – with its emphasis on putting recipients in the proverbial driver’s seat – promised to transform the relationship between donors and recipients, especially how they designed and implemented aid, in the interest of greater effectiveness.¹ In the decade since, scholars and practitioners have tried to

1 In this article, I use the somewhat old-fashioned and blunt language of *donors* and *recipients*. I recognize that these are problematic terms, not least because several donors would be more accurately described as lenders. Still, I prefer this terminology to the more politically correct alternative of ‘development partners’ (or, as they are known in Mali, ‘technical and financial partners’) and ‘partner countries’ because they mask the power dynamics of one actor transferring funds to another. They are also quite imprecise: Not only donor governments and agencies could accurately be referred to as ‘development partners’, but also the recipient government, as well as domestic and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Similarly, since partnership goes both ways, ‘partner countries’ could be used to describe both donor and recipient countries.

assess how much has actually changed in practices ‘on the ground’. Their findings have been generally pessimistic. Collectively, development actors have failed to put the new aid effectiveness norms into practice. As detailed below, several case studies suggest that, if anything, donors have strengthened their capacity to impose their priorities on recipient governments.

In this article, I explore the cases of Mali and Ghana, and ask the following two questions: How are recipient governments applying the Paris principle of ownership? What explains the forms it is taking? I find that formal ownership is strongly applied, in the sense that both countries have authored and adopted national development plans, rather than having them imposed by international actors, as often used to be the case. However, three deficiencies undermine the substance of the ownership principle: First, each country has multiple plans without sufficient prioritization among them. Second, the plans also lack prioritization within them. Together, the lack of strategic priorities undermines the very notion of a nationally owned planning process. Third, weaknesses in the actual implementation of the plans suggest that broader ownership exists more in theory than in actual practice. Although many scholars and especially practitioners attribute these problems to deficiencies in developing countries’ national capacity and, to a lesser extent, will, recipient governments have strong incentives – mainly financial ones from donors – to write numerous, all-inclusive plans, even if they are not able or willing to implement their contents.

The article is organized as follows: First, I present the Paris Principles and the central place of ownership in them. Second, I analyse in greater depth the concept of ownership. Third, I outline my methodology and the 2 case studies. Fourth, I assess ownership in Mali and Ghana, including an analysis of each of the 3 types of deficiency outlined above. Fifth, I offer my explanation of these problems. A conclusion sums up my argument and highlights its relevance for future research.

The Aid Effectiveness Agenda and the ownership principle

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness was proclaimed in February 2005, as the culmination of a high-level forum held under the aegis of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD/DAC), the main club of traditional Western donors.² A total of 138 countries – both donors and recipients – have signed the declaration, as have 28 international organizations and numerous NGOs and civil society networks.³ It comprises five basic principles: ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results and mutual accountability.

2 This description is not completely accurate, as the European Union and Japan are members and South Korea recently joined, as have Iceland and some former Soviet Bloc countries, namely the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Nonetheless, the DAC remains the main body that represents the perspectives of traditional Western bilateral donors. For a list of the DAC’s 30 members, see OECD (n.d. b).

3 For a complete list of signatories, see OECD (n.d. a).

The Paris Declaration was groundbreaking in several ways, not least because donors were implicitly recognizing that the failures of past aid were not solely due to problems in recipient countries. In contrast with the highly influential 1998 World Bank report, *Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why*, which blamed recipients' deficient institutional environments for disappointing results (World Bank, 1998), donors recognized in Paris that they themselves also needed to change the way they operated, including by setting aside their own priorities, self-interest and rivalry and work together to support recipient countries' priorities. Henceforth, recipients would set their own development priorities and plans, donors would adopt them as their own and coordinate among themselves to help the government implement them. It is worth noting, however, that Aid Effectiveness Agenda relates more to *efficiency* than actual *effectiveness*. Its principles concern primarily the organization of aid, rather than its content. As a result, aid could be exemplary in its application of all the principles, yet utterly ineffective if the development strategy ill-conceived. Even if they provide no guarantees of effectiveness, they are meant to make effectiveness more probable.

Initially, the OECD held high hopes that the Paris Declaration would 'significantly increase[] the impact of aid' (OECD, 2006, p. 49). Nonetheless, it recognized that, 'Put simply, the Paris Declaration is about changing behaviour', and '[f]or it to yield results, however, it will have to be matched by serious and sustained political resolve at the highest level' (OECD, 2006, p. 54). Within a few years, it became clear that the actors involved lacked the required will to implement the principles or perhaps some other factor was preventing them from doing so. Of the 13 quantitative targets they set for themselves for 2010, the OECD determined that they met only one and only by a small margin (OECD, 2012, p. 19).

These macro-level findings on the failure to enact the aid effectiveness principles motivated me to seek to understand better the reasons, including by comparing aid dynamics as they play out on the ground in African countries. Though my research project is much broader, this article focuses on the Paris Declaration's first principle, ownership, because, as explained below, it is the keystone of the Aid Effectiveness Agenda.

The Paris Declaration (OECD, n.d. c, p. 3) describes ownership as follows:

Partner countries [i.e. recipient countries] exercise effective leadership over their development policies, and strategies and co-ordinate development actions.

Partner countries commit to:

- Exercise leadership in developing and implementing their national development strategies through broad consultative processes.
- Translate these national development strategies into prioritised results-oriented operational programmes as expressed in medium-term expenditure frameworks and annual budgets.
- Take the lead in co-ordinating aid at all levels in conjunction with other development resources in dialogue with donors and encouraging the participation of civil society and the private sector.

Donors commit to:

- Respect partner country leadership and help strengthen their capacity to exercise it.

The Accra Agenda for Action – the outcome of the 2008 high-level forum on aid effectiveness, held 3 years after Paris – clarified that ownership of development strategies was not the sole domain of the executive branch of national governments. Rather, ‘Developing country governments will work more closely with parliaments and local authorities in preparing, implementing and monitoring national development policies and plans. They will also engage with civil society organisations (CSOs)’ (OECD, n.d. c, p. 16). The Agenda for Action also mentions ‘parliaments, central and local governments, CSOs, research institutes, media and the private sector . . . tak[ing] an active role in dialogue on development policy and on the role of aid in contributing to countries’ development objectives’ (OECD, n.d. c, p. 16).

The Paris Declaration’s sole indicator relating to ownership is the ‘Number of countries with national development strategies (including PRSs) that have clear strategic priorities linked to a medium-term expenditure framework and reflected in annual budgets’ (OECD, n.d. c, p. 9). The target was not even close to being met: only 37 per cent of the 76 recipient countries surveyed had ‘a national development strategy rated “A” or “B” on a five-point scale’ in 2010, compared to the goal of 75 per cent (OECD, 2012, p. 19). In this report, Ghana’s strategy was given a ‘B’ and Mali’s a ‘C’ (OECD, 2012, p. 117).

After the following summit, held in Busan, South Korea, in 2011, a new body took over the effectiveness agenda, the Global Partnership for Effectiveness Development Cooperation. Its mandate broadened, as its name implies, from aid effectiveness to development effectiveness, and its membership expanded to include more non-state actors, including from civil society, the private sector and private foundations. Ownership remained an important item on the post-Busan agenda, with a new set of quantitative targets to be reached by 2015. As for the Paris Declaration’s targets for 2010, results were disappointing: Instead of half of the recipient governments improving their country systems, only 18 per cent of 60 countries surveyed improved their scores between 2010 and 2015, while 23 per cent ‘experienced a decline’, and the remainder showed no significant change (OECD/UNDP, 2016, pp. 20–21, 62). Indicators for donors – namely the use of recipients’ country systems, the untying of aid and the predictability of aid – improved only marginally, if at all (OECD/UNDP, 2016, pp. 20–21, 68–77).⁴

4 The inclusion of donor-related indicators under the rubric of ownership is debatable. They correspond more closely to the Paris principle of ‘alignment’, but the latter has been de-emphasized since Busan, along with harmonization among donors.

Unpacking the concept of ownership

According to the Paris Declaration, ownership is the *sine qua non* of the application of the Aid Effectiveness Principles. A nationally owned development strategy is a requirement for donor countries to align their aid with the government's priorities and the basis for them to harmonize their development assistance among themselves. It must come first.

A more pessimistic prediction presents a scenario that reverses the chronological chain of events. Coordination among donors permits them to pre-select a preferred development strategy, most likely one based on dominant neoliberal perspectives, and the recipient government then must align with it, rather than the other way around (see discussion in Saliba-Couture, 2011, pp. 187–190). Finally, the recipient country would claim ownership, but it would not be genuine, as the government would have adopted the development strategy as the only way to access donor funds – just as how Emma Mawdsley (2007, p. 498) found that the five countries she analysed all identified 'remarkably similar' key priorities when seeking funding from the US government's Millennium Challenge Corporation, which had made known its preferred areas of funding.

The concept of ownership was central to foreign aid even before it was codified in the Paris Declaration in 2005. For instance, a key OECD policy document published in 1999, *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation*, contains numerous references to the importance of 'local ownership' (OECD, 1999, pp. 9, 13–15). Likewise, the 'Monterrey Consensus' that resulted from the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Mexico in 2002, also recognizes that 'Effective partnerships among donors and recipients are based on the recognition of national leadership and ownership of development plans' (UN, 2003, p. 14). Country-driven development that includes broad-based participation was one of the core principles of the 'post-Washington Consensus' poverty-reduction strategies promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), starting in 1999, largely as a response to the failures of economic conditionality at the heart of their structural adjustment programmes. Writing shortly before the adoption of the Paris Declaration, Geske Dijkstra (2005) examines the adoption of poverty-reduction strategies in 3 Latin American countries – Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua – and concludes that there was 'limited country ownership with respect to the contents of the strategies', in large part because the writing processes were donor-driven and the extensive consultations were 'cosmetic' (Dijkstra, 2005, pp. 451–452).

Some of the more theoretical literature questions the very utility of the concept of ownership. Marc Raffinot, for instance, considers it extremely ambiguous, including because of the limited autonomy space that development countries have when it comes to formulating policy, not just because of donor conditionality, but also market forces and international norms and rules (Raffinot, 2010, p. 90). He also challenges the very core assumption of ownership, suggesting that donor-driven agendas might be more effective than national ones if donors are more poverty averse (Raffinot,

2010, pp. 90–91) – although he appears to assume that donors would actually be able to impose poverty reduction on an unwilling government, which his example of Zimbabwe seems to undermine.

Like Raffinot (2010), Charles Saliba-Couture highlights the ambiguity of the term, noting how different authors and actors use the term to mean different things and how its meaning varies when juxtaposed with qualifiers, for instance ‘government ownership’, ‘country ownership’, ‘national ownership’, ‘democratic ownership’ and ‘local ownership’ (Saliba-Couture, 2011, p. 183). Because no one voice can be said to speak for a country, Willem Buiter (2007, p. 651) considers the term country ownership ‘at best unhelpful and at worst misleading and obfuscating’ and advocates abandoning the concept of ownership altogether. Saliba-Couture (2011, p. 185) also notes how the literature on low levels of ownership emphasizes recipient governments’ lack of administrative capacity, financial resources, expertise and information. However, as David Booth (2012) argues, rather than explaining lack of ownership, these – and ownership itself – should be considered objectives and not preconditions for effective aid. He recommends that donors, therefore, do more to build ownership, which is in fact something they committed to when they signed the Paris Declaration (see excerpt above).

Without jettisoning altogether the idea that development strategies should preferably come from within and not be imposed by donors, it is important to recognize 2 things: First, that just because a policy can be said to be nationally owned does not mean that it is a good one and worthy of support. Second, the idea of a national consensus on complex and multifaceted matters such as development policy is a fiction. Even relatively straightforward binary choices between either Leave and Remain or between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump split the UK and the US virtually down the middle. Similarly, no consensus existed on same-sex marriage in countries that legalized it, also a simple yes/no decision. Policy-making is perforce a top-down process and quite technocratic. It seems impossible that a whole country would rally behind a detailed development policy that will inevitably make hard choices on what to prioritize and thereby create winners and losers.

As problematic as the ownership term is, its enabling fictions are nonetheless useful and the principle stands that the recipient government, in consultation with other domestic actors, should set development policy and that donors’ default position should be to align their assistance with it. Still, those principles are not absolute. As Goran Hyden (2008) argues, the Paris Declaration is predicated on trust between donors and recipients, and sometimes that trust is absent for good reasons.

The OECD monitored the implementation of the Aid Effectiveness Agenda as measured against the quantitative targets set out in the Paris Declaration. However, qualitative research has not been as complete, notably in explaining the lack of implementation. Some empirically grounded research suggests that donors are indeed reluctant to let recipient governments take charge. Eduardo Bidaurratzaga-Aurrea and Colom-Jaén (2012) document the lack of ownership in the case of HIV/AIDS policies in Mozambique, illustrating how donors can harmonize among themselves and,

acting as a cartel, impose their public health policy priorities on a recipient country, thereby circumventing national ownership but presumably saving living lives – an illustration of the phenomenon anticipated by Raffinot (2010). Similarly, Rachel Hayman analyses donors' unwillingness to cede control to the government of Rwanda, despite the latter's high degree of formal ownership of its development strategy, which must nonetheless be approved by donors. She describes this as 'joint ownership [...] between government and donors, where the locus is international, which is quite different from national or country ownership where the main locus would be an interaction amongst government and people' (Hayman, 2009a, p. 597). By way of contrast, Rosemary McGee and Heredia (2012) found that the Colombian government used the Paris principles of ownership and alignment to justify controversial policies and decrease the influence of donors and both international and domestic NGOs. The different result in the Colombian case could be due to the government's stronger state capacity, its lesser dependence on aid or its pre-existing strong bargaining position *vis-à-vis* international actors. More case studies and comparative work are required to test the generalizability of findings, trace evolving practices, as well as explain inter-country and inter-regional differences. This article makes an attempt to move the debate forward with an analysis of two cases, Mali and Ghana.

Methods and the two cases

The article draws extensively from semi-structured interviews I conducted in Bamako, Mali, in April 2015 and in Accra, Ghana, in July 2016. In each country, I interviewed 17–18 current and retired officials of Western bilateral aid agencies and embassies, multilateral organizations, national and international non-governmental organizations and the national government. I also interviewed the Ghanaian High Commissioner to Canada in Ottawa and attended as an observer a meeting of donors and domestic and international NGOs in Bamako to discuss strategies to engage the Malian government on the issue of family planning. All interviewees spoke in a personal capacity. When citing the interviews below, I provide as much identifying information as permitted by the interviewee. Most of them did not want to be cited by name in order to allow them to speak candidly. In such cases, I identify them with a generic title of their own choosing and do not specify the exact date that the interview took place. In the one case where the interviewee did not permit me to use any identifying information at all, I refer to that citation as an 'unattributable interview'. When interviews were conducted in French, I translated the quotations into English. The fieldwork is supplemented by the analysis of publicly accessible scholarly studies, as well as official aid-related documents and data that I obtained from officials I interviewed and on public websites.

I chose these 2 countries as potentially contrasting cases: Mali, a poor, fragile, aid-dependent country with low state capacity, and Ghana, a more stable and wealthier country with greater capacity. The first, Mali, was previously described as 'a laboratory for the implementation of the Paris Declaration' (Bergamaschi, 2009, p. 217) and 'the

Paris Agenda success story in francophone West Africa' (Whitfield and Fraser, 2009, p. 361). In fact, even 'long before' the Paris Declaration, 'Mali was a pioneer – albeit more as a testing ground than as a leader – in the improvement of aid effectiveness' (Magassa and Meyer, 2008, p. 3). A 2011 study notes that aid reform, though initially disappointing, 'saw significant improvement in the 2006–2010 period' (Wood et al., 2011, p. 110; see also Virchaux, 2007, pp. 221–222). Few assessments of Mali's aid programme and relationships with donors have been made since then – and none using data since the 2012 military coup d'état, which caused donors to be more critical in their assessment of the situation in Mali. The coup led to aid sanctions, but development assistance flowed again with the return to civilian rule later that year and the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections in 2013.⁵

Mali is a relatively poor country, even for Sub-Saharan Africa, facing tremendous development challenges. In 2015, its per capita gross national income was US\$760 (World Bank, 2017). It is also highly dependent on foreign aid, which was equivalent to 10 per cent of gross national income and a mammoth 75 per cent of central government expenditure in 2015 (World Bank, 2017). For two decades after democratization in the early 1990s, Mali was a 'donor darling' and considered a 'good pupil', receiving significant amounts of foreign aid (Bergamaschi, 2014; Magassa and Meyer, 2008, p. 3; see also van de Walle, 2013). Nonetheless, despite advances in some indicators, Mali remains stuck near the bottom of the Human Development Index, ranking 175th out of 188 in 2015 (UNDP, 2016, p. 200). In theory, Mali's weak capacity and relatively high level of aid dependence ought to mean that donors are more able to impose their will there than elsewhere. However, the separatist and Islamist rebellion in the North, where UN peacekeepers are now stationed, could strengthen the government's hand in bargaining with donors, who fear the spread of violence and fundamentalism across international borders and have therefore become more reluctant to engage too forcefully with the government on development issues or cut aid.⁶ As a fragile, conflict-affected state, Mali is thus an interesting case in which to analyse the evolving dynamics of aid provision and donor-recipient relations.

The second case study, Ghana, has also been considered a 'donor darling' and World Bank–anointed 'success story' since the early 1990s (Opoku, 2010, p. 155). Writing in 2005, Hughes wrote that 'Ghana's contemporary success can be ascribed to an increasingly co-operative and mutually reinforcing relationship between the Ghanaian government and the international community', citing its 'strong economic and political relationships with the West, and, more importantly, with the donor

5 For more information on the coup, the French intervention, the deeper origins of the crisis and the uncoordinated suspension and resumption of aid, see Bleck and Michelitch (2015), Charbonneau and Sears (2014), Paul et al. (2014) and Wing (2013).

6 Numerous interviewees stated that France and the US are particularly interested in Mali because of the national and transnational instability caused by the security situation. Some donors worry that their withdrawal would lead to an overthrow of the government and the installation of an Islamist regime.

community. Furthermore, for almost half a century, Ghana has been a laboratory for a succession of domestic and internationally crafted developmental and macro-economic prescriptions' (Hughes, 2005, pp. 75–76). An early evaluation of the Paris Declaration's implementation in Ghana was quite positive, especially in the area of ownership (Quartey et al., 2010).

Ghana's steady growth and relatively good governance shined all the brighter in comparison with other countries in the tumultuous West African region, several of which have experienced great instability, including coups and civil wars. In 2010, following a rebasing of its gross domestic product, Ghana 'graduated' from low-income to lower middle-income country (LMIC) status. The shine has worn off, however, in recent years, as Ghana's fiscal situation has worsened, despite the discovery of oil off its coast – or perhaps encouraged by it, since the government's overspending was in part fuelled by the newfound sense of wealth and access to credit. As a result, donors have virtually ceased providing general budget support and the country has had to seek assistance from the IMF, obtaining a \$918 million credit facility for the period 2015–2018 (IMF, 2015).

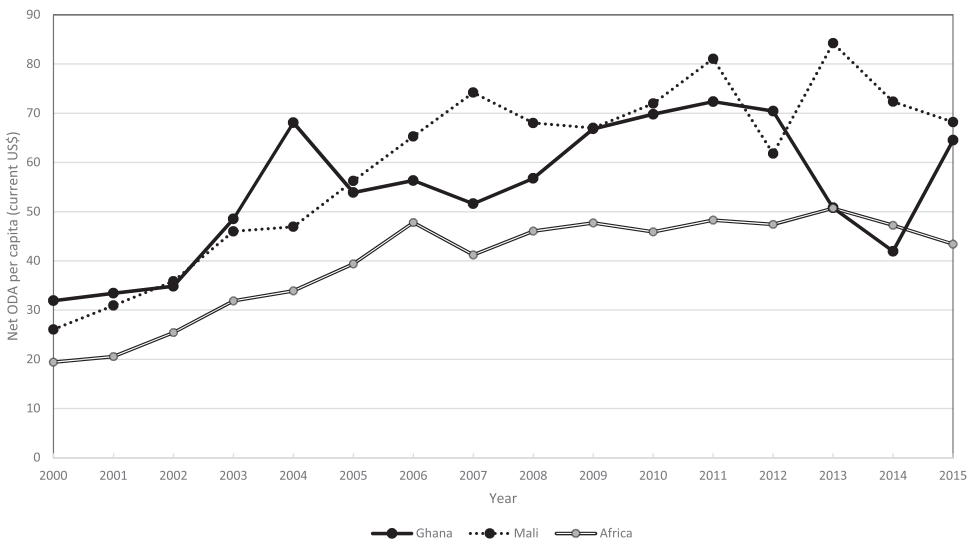
In 2015, Ghana's per capita gross national income was US\$1480, almost twice as high as Mali's (World Bank, 2017). Its level of human development is considered 'medium', holding 139th place (UNDP, 2016, p. 200). Official development assistance (ODA) received was equivalent to 5 per cent of gross national income in 2015, less than one-third of what it was in 2004, and 22 per cent of central government expenditure in 2011, respectively two and three-and-a-half times less than Mali's (World Bank, 2017). As can be seen in Figure 1 below, both countries almost always receive significantly more aid per capita than the average for the African continent. Per capita ODA to Mali has more or less steadily increased since at least 2000, with a dip in 2012 after the coup d'état, more than tripling from \$26 in 2000 to a peak of \$84 in 2013. Similarly, Ghana more than doubled from \$32 per Ghanaian in 2000 to \$72 in 2011, but then declined by over 40 per cent to \$42 between 2011 and 2014. As a result, Mali's total aid receipts have overtaken Ghana's, even though it has a significantly smaller population.⁷ Despite the increase in 2015, aid to Ghana is likely to continue to decline, mainly due to the country's attainment of LMIC status, as well as to concerns over corruption and lax fiscal policy. Nonetheless, its long-term importance to donors and its sophisticated development planning and aid management mechanisms make it an important case study as a complement to Mali, which has much weaker capacities.

Assessing ownership

The level of ownership

Can one say Mali and Ghana 'own' their development strategies? Are the countries able to set their priorities, as well as design and implement their programmes, as foreseen in

⁷ In 2015, Mali's population was 17.6 million and Ghana's 27.4 million (World Bank, 2017).

Figure 1: ODA per capita to Ghana and Mali from all donors, 2000-2015.

Source: OECD (2017).

the Paris Declaration? Or do they negotiate their strategies with donors, who have already made clear what that are willing to fund, as described by several critical authors in regard to other countries or more generally?

In both countries, the level of formal ownership is high, in the sense that development plans – or at least the most recent ones – have been developed nationally and the government sees them as overarching frameworks. Still, as argued above, ownership should not be equated with government ownership. This study does not have access to data that would show the extent to which the consultations that have taken place in both countries have been meaningful, that is, how broad ownership can be said to be.

Mali's third World-Bank-backed Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (*Cadre stratégique pour la croissance et la réduction de la pauvreté*, CSCRP) spans the years 2012–2017 (Mali, 2011). Although the strategy paper predates the coup, the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, elected in 2013, remains committed to it, according to most accounts. Even if it was drafted with some international assistance, respondents almost unanimously agreed that there is a high degree of national ownership of the CSCRP, which was drawn up after a complex and inclusive consultation process – in contrast with previous strategy papers (Bergamaschi et al., 2007; Cissoko and Touré, 2005; Dante et al., 2003; Wood et al., 2011, p. 111).

The situation in Ghana is quite similar. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the terms of structural adjustment programmes and Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiatives were to a larger extent dictated from Washington (Whitfield, 2005, 2010; Woll, 2008). However, the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategies (GPRS I and II, 2003–2005 and 2006–2009) marked, in the words of a government official, 'a magnificent

shift towards ownership'.⁸ The more recent 'medium-term' (four-year) development policy frameworks – the *Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda (GSGDA), 2010–2013*, and its successor (*GSGDA II*), covering the period 2014–2017 (Ghana, 2010b, 2014) – have been drawn up nationally, following a broad consultation process. In other words, Ghana's development planning is also characterized by a high degree of ownership from that perspective.

However, three significant problems challenge these positive assessments. First, there are multiple plans, which are not necessarily coherent and muddy the waters of what is actually being owned. Second, the plans are overly inclusive. When such plans do not provide strategic prioritization – that is, if virtually everything is included in an unrealistic wish list – they hollow out the content of ownership to the point of meaninglessness. Third, even if the plans are good, follow-up can be deficient to the extent that it constitutes an abandonment of ownership. The rest of this section examines each of these problems in turn, while the next one tries to tease out the reasons behind the deficiencies identified.

Competing national plans

The first problem with the nationally owned plans named above is that they are not the only development plans in effect. In Mali, the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta issued two additional strategies soon after coming to power in 2013: a short-term one labelled 'sustainable revival plan', *Plan pour la Relance Durable du Mali 2013–2014* (Mali, 2013a), the other a medium-term 'government action plan', *Programme d'Actions du Gouvernement 2013–2018* (Mali, 2013b). With three strategy documents simultaneously in effect, without much coherence among them, it remained unclear which one constituted the government's actual blueprint for development activities. A fourth document, a joint assistance strategy (*Stratégie Commune d'Assistance Pays*), written with donors, covered the period 2008–2011 and has not been updated. At the time of the fieldwork, efforts were underway to produce a fifth document, an interim CSCR that would take into account the post-coup context, and integrate the *Programme d'Actions du Gouvernement*.⁹ It remains to be seen whether the new document will provide more focused guidance or take precedence over the other documents.¹⁰

The Ghanaian government has also issued a number of plans. They tend to be more sequential than Mali's, especially the medium-term plans, and contrary to Mali's they

8 Interview with Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, July 19, 2016.

9 Interview with a senior government official at the Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et du Budget, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

10 Similarly competing plans also characterized Mali before the 2012 coup, whereby the government used one to mobilize donor financial support and another to garner local political support (Bergamaschi, 2011, p. 144).

are explicitly meant to fit into each other, but do not necessarily do so. The aid components of these plans are meant to be guided by two further documents: the *Ghana Aid Policy and Strategy, 2011–2015* (Ghana, 2010a) and a ‘compact’ between the government and donors for the period 2012–2022 (Ghana, 2012). A further long-term (40-year) national development plan, covering the period 2018–2057, is under preparation, including extensive consultations.

In both countries, these plans are supplemented by sector- or ministry-specific ones, which are not necessarily consistent. The existence of multiple, overlapping plans in Mali and Ghana make it difficult to identify which strategy is in fact being owned, further confused by incoherence and lack of prioritization among them. This lack of clarity – what might even be termed quality – fundamentally undermines the content and therefore the concept of ownership.

Over-inclusiveness

The second problem in assessing the ownership of Mali and Ghana’s development plans is their extremely comprehensive scope. In Mali, the three plans in force as a whole and the CSCRP, in particular, contain provisions for cooperation in virtually all sectors imaginable. The CSCRP outlines strategies for 44 different areas, from rural development to communication for development (Mali 2011). As one donor official put it, ‘Everyone and their grandmother is in it’.¹¹ As a result, the government is open to almost any kind of assistance and donors will find their own priorities somewhere in the CSCRP and potentially the other documents as well, meaning that nothing can really be said to be imposed.

The situation is similar in Ghana, if not quite as extreme. Rather than naming a large number of specific sectors, the plans tend to aggregate a large number of areas into more general sectors, lacking detail. Interviewees almost all agreed that the result more closely resembles an extensive wish list than a strategic plan and, consequently, almost any activity can be said to be compatible with the plan. A Canadian aid official stated that ‘The plans are so broad you could drive a truck through them’.¹² This view was not, however, unanimous: Two Ghanaian government officials claimed that the plans did have some implicit prioritization within them and, moreover, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning requires a plan-related justification before allocating any financing for a project, implying that not everything could be found in the current plans.¹³

11 Interview with Ini Huijts, First Secretary (Health), Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Bamako, Mali, April 15, 2015. She added that: ‘It does not encourage rational policy decision-making. Some things are on the lists of different ministries, and they do them separately.’

12 Interview with a Canadian aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

13 Interviews with a senior official in the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Accra, Ghana, July 2016 and Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the

The fact that development plans are all-inclusive provides additional evidence that they are not squarely imposed from outside, as donors, especially if operating in a cartel, would have emphasized certain sectors and approaches. As mentioned above, the sole Paris Declaration indicator for ownership requires ‘national development strategies [...] that have *clear strategic priorities*’ (OECD, n.d. c, p. 9, emphasis added). For without any clear prioritization within them, the government-owned plans cannot be considered an actual strategy – thereby rendering the issue of ownership effectively moot.

Ineffective follow-up

The Paris Declaration description of ownership, cited above, comprises not only the development of development strategies but also their implementation. The lack of follow-up constitutes a third area that problematizes ownership. Widely shared claims of a high degree of formal ownership are contradicted by inaction in certain areas. A striking example is family planning in Mali. The country has the second-highest fertility rates in the world: an average of 6.1 births per woman in 2015 (World Bank, 2017). This is widely recognized as a development problem, including in the CSCR, which notes that a high population growth rate can ‘erase all poverty-reduction efforts’ (Mali, 2011, p. 30). As a result, the CSCR outlines the importance of promoting family planning, both as a stand-alone issue (1 of the 44) and under the areas of education, nutrition and health (Mali, 2011, pp. 69–70, 79, 87–88). The *Programme d’Actions du Gouvernement 2013–2018* also emphasizes reproductive health and its ‘key element’ of family planning in order to ‘reduce not only maternal mortality rates, but also especially tame population growth’ (Mali, 2013b, p. 39). In addition, the government of Mali participates in regional and international initiatives on family planning. By all accounts, however, it is extremely reluctant for various reasons to actually promote family planning at the local level. Despite apparent ownership of the formulation of the policy, the government seems to prefer inaction. Interviewees agreed that it was not a question of capacity, but rather political will related to cultural preferences, citing the example of the government allowing donor-funded condoms to sit unused in warehouses rather than distributing them through existing clinics.¹⁴ As a result, donors prefer to fund NGOs instead of the government to work in this area.¹⁵ Decentralization is another example of a sector where ‘movement is slow because of wavering political support’, despite a claim of government ownership.¹⁶

Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, July 19, 2016.

¹⁴ Interview with a senior official, Western aid agency, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

¹⁵ Interview with an international official of an international NGO, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

¹⁶ Interview with Peter d’Huys, Head of Cooperation, Belgian Embassy, Bamako, Mali, April 14, 2015. According to a European technical cooperation official, donors are waiting for the

Ownership is not reflected in action in the fight against female genital mutilation, either.¹⁷

In Ghana, too, although donor officials reported that implementation was proceeding well in some sectors (such as health, education and decentralization), they also emphasized how it was not the case in others. Collectively, the donors expressed much dissatisfaction with the follow-up of the development plans and strategies. For instance, a European embassy official bluntly stated, ‘The government is great at writing plans and then ignoring them’.¹⁸ Such views were echoed by Ghanaian NGO officials as well. One stated that ‘Strategies get curtailed along the way, abandoned, as the government wants to do new things’.¹⁹ The ‘compact’ between the government and the donors was abandoned soon after it was signed, while many donor officials doubt how realistic it is to draw up a 40-year plan – ‘dreaming of being South Korea’, in a donor official’s words²⁰ – especially in the middle of an election campaign, in a system characterized by ‘competitive clientelist electoral politics’ (Oduro et al., 2014, p. 25).

Ownership, to be meaningful, must go beyond the identification stage and lead to actual implementation. Although often not the case, national strategy documents must be accompanied by coherent sectoral planning, expenditure frameworks and budget allocations that promote and make possible the operationalization of ownership.

Understanding deficiencies in planning and implementation

Why does the government not do more to ‘own’ the concept of ownership? In other words, what explains the lack of prioritization between and within plans, as well as the deficiencies in actual implementation? In Mali, other than in the case of contraception, most interviewees emphasized the government’s lack of capacity.²¹ A common

government to develop a decentralization strategy, but the government prefers to go to each donor individually (interview, Bamako, Mali, April 2015).

17 Pierre Amadou Nèbié, Coordinator, Technical Pool of Financial and Technical Partners, UNDP, interview, Bamako, Mali, April 16, 2015.

18 Interview with a European embassy official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

19 Interview with Franklin Oduro, Head of Research and Programs/Deputy Director, Centre for Democratic Development, Accra, Ghana, July 22, 2016.

20 Interview with a European aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

21 One international aid official said that the Malian government’s ‘Planning Department is like a statistics department, but horrible. [When planning for this year], they just take last year’s budget and add 1%’. A Malian official at an international NGO called government leadership ‘very, very weak’. The head of development cooperation in a European embassy went one adverb further, stating that ‘The administration has very, very, very little capacity’ (interview, Bamako, Mali, April 2015). Still, when the government was committed to some goals (such as organizing elections), it has the ability to attain them – suggesting a lack of leadership from the top, rather than capacity per se (interview with Pierre Amadou Nèbié, Coordinator, Technical Pool of Financial and Technical Partners, UNDP, Bamako, Mali, April 16, 2015; interview with a Malian official at an international NGO).

refrain was that ministers and senior ministry staff only had a handful of dedicated people around them, insufficient to draw up a strategic plan in their area or for the country as a whole.²² Some interviewees, however, noted that donors bore some responsibility for the lack of capacity in government: Over a decade of donor-led structural adjustment programmes not only reduced the size of the state and therefore its capacity, but also contributed to the deterioration of the education sector, which reduced the capacity of the next generation of civil servants to replace retirees.²³ Some interviewees also pointed out that donor agencies and international organizations often ‘poached’ the best government personnel by offering them better salaries and other perks, thereby reducing the state’s capacity.²⁴

However, it is not solely a question of capacity. Numerous interviewees in Mali also emphasized the lack of leadership or will, a perennial problem (see also Bergamaschi et al., 2007; Meyer and Schulz, 2008, p. 10). Even if the strategy is formally owned by the highest levels of government, this commitment does not automatically transfer to lower-rank government officials whose daily work is often disconnected from broader plans.²⁵ Incentives also play an important role, making it smart or at least rational to trade substantial ownership for aid revenue. Why limit oneself to a smaller list of areas when a maximalist approach will attract the greatest amount of financial resources? Because it wants as much funding as it can get, the government accepts all proposals from donors, who can thus disregard substantive ownership and ‘do whatever they like’.²⁶ Moreover, central government authorities can reduce rivalry among ministries by refusing to select priority sectors.²⁷ In fact, it is not clear to what extent the Malian government actually aspires to substantive ownership, and Isaline Bergamaschi’s (2009, p. 241) observations remain valid today: ‘the government

22 For instance, interview with Peter d’Huys, Head of Cooperation, Belgian Embassy, Bamako, Mali, April 14, 2015.

23 Interviews with a European technical cooperation official, the head of development cooperation in a Western embassy, and an international development consultant, Bamako, Mali, April 2015. Delville (2013) and Saliba-Couture (2011, p. 191) make this point more generally.

24 Interview with the head of development cooperation in a Western embassy, Bamako, Mali, April 2015.

25 Interview with Peter d’Huys, Head of Cooperation, Belgian Embassy, Bamako, Mali, April 14, 2015.

26 Interview with Pierre Amadou Nébié, Coordinator, Technical Pool of Financial and Technical Partners, UNDP, Bamako, Mali, April 16, 2015.

27 Government ministries compete for resources and their interests often mitigate against the intra-governmental coordination that a national strategy requires (see Bergamaschi, 2009, p. 242). For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs manages aid grants, but donors’ loans, especially those from multilateral organizations, fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance – and the two operate independently (interview with Mamadou Namory Traoré, retired government and donor official, Bamako, Mali, April 17, 2015).

does not seem to fully consider the Paris Agenda as an opportunity to be more assertive in taking leadership and negotiating aid’.

In Ghana, interviewees also raised the issue of the lack of capacity, though less frequently than in Mali. A European embassy official, for instance, stated that ‘Officials are short-sighted and opportunistic, not good at adopting a medium- or long-term view’, while also recognizing that the government is overwhelmed by the number of donors relationships it has to manage, as well as the rapidly changing development landscape, including the repercussions of achieving LMIC status and the rise of emerging donors: ‘It says yes to everything . . . but it is not in control of the process’.²⁸ A Western aid official stated that the government ‘is not very responsible with money. Not out of bad intentions, but it is not very able to flow funds into the decentralized system down to the local level’.²⁹

Lack of will, however, was more commonly cited. Donor officials repeatedly suggested that, as in Mali, the inclusion of a maximum number of sectors and priorities was part of a resource maximization effort, whereby no external financing would be refused – even if the government did not have the activities as a *de facto* priority, which reduced the likelihood of implementation. Woll (2008, p. 74) found a similar pattern in the past, arguing that ‘the Ghanaian government formulated development strategies with a view of pleasing the donors but with little intention to alter conventional patterns of everyday politics’, including in order to receive debt relief.

The recent reduction in foreign aid to Ghana, combined with the rise in the proportion provided as loans rather than as grants and the hardening of loan terms, increases the incentive to seek as much ODA as possible by accepting all development assistance on offer, exacerbated by the uncertainty as to when further government funds will be released.³⁰ Nonetheless, it is worth keeping in mind, as several interviewees pointed out, that all sectors actually are important for development. Moreover, since the Ministry of Finance requires activities to be in the plan in order to be funded, too narrow a plan would make it hard to get funding not only from donors but also within government.³¹

In sum, it would be misleading to say that donors are imposing their agendas wholesale on the Malian government. The latter, to a great extent, owns its development plans. However, formal ownership does not necessarily imply that plans are actually strategic in their prioritization of sectors or that action will follow – nor, if it does, that it will be effective in reducing poverty or otherwise promoting development (Rafinot, 2010, pp. 90–92). With such broad and potentially contradictory visions of development, what is formally owned by the Malian government may actually be of little

28 Interview with a European embassy official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

29 Interview with a Western aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

30 Interview with a European aid official, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

31 Interview with Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, July 19, 2016.

practical advantage. The same could be said about some sectors of the Ghanaian development process. Thus the quality of the strategy, as well as the will and ability to implement it, are as important as the degree of ownership, a factor ignored in most discussions relating to the Aid Effectiveness Agenda's emphasis on ownership.

A further qualification should be added to claims of strong ownership. Governments can propose plans aimed at pleasing donors. Donors 'are part of the domestic policy space', as one Ghanaian government official stated,³² and recipient countries certainly know what donors' policy preferences are. As one former official at Ghana's Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning put it, real ownership must comprise leadership, which includes the willingness to tell donors to 'get lost',³³ but the Ghanaian government tends to tell donors what they want to hear in order to obtain more aid. Some would go further, arguing that donors' involvement in development programmes (as opposed to stand-alone projects) has embedded their own officials in government, including all sector ministries, leading to a form of 'co-governance', whereby the donors 'clearly lay out what needs to be done'.³⁴ Moreover, many government officials have been trained in donor countries and have sometimes served in multilateral development agencies, which can help shape development visions or internalize donor perspectives. Ghana's and Malawi's ministers of finance, for instance, both previously held senior positions at the IMF in Washington.

Conclusion

The practice of ownership has evolved in recent years. On the one hand, donor officials are not writing development strategies for and imposing them on recipient countries, as was often the case in the past, as described by Dijkstra (2005) and Raffinot (2010) – at least not in the case of Mali and Ghana. This manifestation of ownership takes place despite that fact that both countries are recipients of high levels of aid and that Mali's state capacity is relatively weak. Predictions of the Paris Declaration creating donor cartels that weaken ownership have not

32 Interview with Kenneth Owusu, Senior Policy Analyst and Technical Assistant to the Director-General, National Development Planning Commission, Accra, Ghana, July 19, 2016.

33 Interview with a former official at the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Accra, Ghana, July 2016.

34 Emmanuel O. Akwetey, Executive Director, Institute for Democratic Governance, Accra, Ghana, July 29, 2016. The almost identical point was made by Yao Graham, Coordinator, Third World Network-Africa, interview, Accra, Ghana, July 27, 2016. Writing over a decade ago, Whitfield (2005, p. 659) similarly argued that

Through the proliferation of government–donor dialogue arenas, donors participate intimately in the design, implementation and monitoring of government programmes and policies. For these reasons, donors form part of the state, rather than external forces acting upon it. In addition to the embeddedness of donors within the state, the state has internalised the [World] Bank's discourse of reform.

proved well founded. On the other hand, the Aid Effectiveness Agenda's vision of substantive ownership is not reflected on the ground because of problems related to strategic prioritization and implementation. As demonstrated in this article, strong incentives operate against them, notably the desire to maximize access to donor funds, and they are more convincing explanations the deficiencies than the mere lack of capacity or will.

More comparative work is needed to see the extent to which these findings hold for other developing countries – and whether different patterns may be observed in countries with states (including 'developmental' states) that may take ownership more seriously and negotiate more strongly with donors. Such governments – such as Ethiopia (see Borchgrevink, 2008; Feyissa, 2011), Rwanda to a certain extent (Hayman, 2009a, 2009b) or Colombia in the example cited above – are in a better position to use the Paris Principles to their advantage, prioritizing certain sectors and forcing donors to align with them. Such cases, however, are quite exceptional.

The growing pressure in traditional donor countries to orient their aid more towards visible results that are attributable to the donor, demonstrating a certain kind of accountability and 'value for money' to sceptical parliamentarians and taxpayers and branding their assistance with signature projects and themes, further erodes the Paris principle of ownership, as well as alignment and harmonization. In many instances, donors' security or commercial interests – the latter also fundamentally characterizing development cooperation from 'emerging donors' – also promote a move away from aid effectiveness by emphasizing instead self-interest. Moreover, the rise of alternative sources of development assistance increases the odds that developing countries will maintain and perhaps expand even further their list of priorities in order to access other funding opportunities, at the expense of substantive ownership. Although it is not yet time to discard the concept of ownership, as proposed by Buiter (2007), scholars and practitioners should pay close attention to the dynamics associated with its application to concrete cases.

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