
Country ownership for a sustainable AIDS response: from principles to practice

This paper was developed by the UNAIDS Secretariat to capture some of the issues discussed in a series of 18 country consultations on country ownership of national AIDS responses that took place during 2010 and 2011. In addition, key conclusions from a global consultation that took place in Geneva in June 2010 and a West and Central Africa regional consultation that was conducted in March 2011 in Dakar were incorporated into this discussion paper. The opinions expressed in the paper are those of participants and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions and policies of the UNAIDS Secretariat or its Cosponsors.

**2011 United Nations General Assembly Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS:
Targets and Commitments**

1. Reduce sexual transmission of HIV by 50 percent by 2015
2. Reduce transmission of HIV among people who inject drugs by 50 percent by 2015
3. Eliminate new HIV infection among children by 2015 and substantially reduce AIDS-related maternal deaths
4. Reach 15 million people living with HIV with lifesaving antiretroviral treatment by 2015
5. Reduce tuberculosis deaths in people living with HIV by 50 percent by 2015
6. Close the global AIDS resource gap by 2015 and reach annual global investment of US\$22-24 billion in low- and middle-income countries
7. Eliminate gender inequalities and gender-based abuse and violence and increase the capacity of women and girls to protect themselves from HIV
8. Eliminate stigma and discrimination against people living with and affected by HIV through promotion of laws and policies that ensure the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms
9. Eliminate HIV-related restrictions on entry, stay and residence
10. Eliminate parallel systems for HIV-related services to strengthen integration of the AIDS response in global health and development efforts

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Executive Summary

This Discussion Paper summarizes key findings from 18 UNAIDS facilitated country consultations on country ownership and sustainability of national AIDS responses held between June 2010 and November 2011. It also incorporates findings from a global consultation that was held in Geneva in June 2010, as well as a regional consultation for West and Central Africa that took place in Dakar in March 2011.

Participants in these consultations included government leaders, representatives from civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, the private sector, people living with HIV, bilateral and multilateral donors and other key partners. Over 1,500 stakeholders participated in these country ownership consultations.

Through plenary and group discussions, participants were asked to consider the following questions:

- What is country ownership?
- Why is country ownership important?
- What are the key elements of country ownership?
- What is needed to assure country ownership and sustainability of national AIDS responses over time?

Participants acknowledged that while significant progress has been made in scaling up HIV prevention, treatment and care services in recent years, increased efforts were needed to move towards universal access and achieving the ambitious targets established in the 2011 United Nations General Assembly Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS. Moreover, it was evident that without countries fully owning and leading their responses, it would not be possible to reach these targets and assure sustainability of national AIDS responses.

A major conclusion from each of the consultations was that “country” does not refer only to governments. While governments undeniably have a critical role to play in national AIDS responses, a much more participatory and inclusive understanding of country has evolved, one that incorporates a range of actors at all levels,

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including civil society, persons living with HIV, affected communities and the private sector.

The consultations did not arrive at a single universal definition of country ownership. Participants highlighted the importance of the “Three Ones” framework (*One agreed HIV/AIDS action framework that provides the basis for coordinating the work of all partners; One national AIDS coordinating authority, with a broad based multi-sector mandate; and One agreed country-level monitoring and evaluation system*) as setting a solid foundation for country ownership. Moreover, there was general agreement that country ownership was not a static entity, but rather a graduated process. Finally, it was agreed that country ownership is not a goal in itself, but a means to an end for achieving effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of national AIDS responses.

There was general consensus among the consultations of key elements that are required to assure country ownership and sustainability of national AIDS responses. These are listed below:

- Strong political engagement and inclusive leadership
- Full engagement of civil society, communities and people living with HIV
- High-quality strategic information
- Robust national strategic plans with smart investment decisions
- Strong partnerships with a “shared responsibility” and mutual accountability
- Effective coordination
- Capacity development
- Integration of HIV into broader health and development strategies

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The consultations reinforced the importance of country ownership as the foundation for developing effective, efficient and sustainable national AIDS responses. UNAIDS will continue to support countries to leverage better, more inclusive, more equitable, more effective, more efficient and more sustainable AIDS responses. By fully owning and leading their national AIDS responses, countries can move towards achieving the UNAIDS vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths.

Introduction

Committed political leadership, early and sustained activism by civil society, social mobilization of communities, innovation and the rapid injection of new funding and other resources have transformed the AIDS response into a major global health success. Increasingly, the importance of strong country ownership is being recognized as a vital factor for sustaining these gains.

In 2005, the Paris Declaration highlighted the importance of country ownership of development policies and processes in the broader aid effectiveness agenda. The understanding of country ownership at the time tended to focus on states and governments. The Accra Agenda for Action (2008), however, outlined a more inclusive understanding of ownership that incorporates civil society, especially those communities most affected by the epidemic.

Most recently, the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2011) underlined the central importance of country ownership and leadership in the design and implementation of national development strategies. Emerging from that high-level gathering were calls for a broadened country-level dialogue on development with key stakeholders, including civil society organizations, people living with HIV, and affected communities.

Crucially, country ownership of the AIDS response is viewed as more than a goal in itself, but as a means to an end—a prerequisite for greater effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.

The processes that informed this paper

A series of global discussions on country ownership of AIDS responses took place during the summer of 2010. These were hosted by the Center for Global Development in Washington DC, by UNAIDS in Geneva, and at the XVIII International AIDS Conference in Vienna (where the discussion was hosted by PEPFAR).

The dialogues reaffirmed the pertinence of country ownership for achieving greater effectiveness and efficiency in the planning, coordination and implementation of sustainable national AIDS responses.

Introduction

A regional consultation was then held in West and Central Africa in March 2011, followed by a series of 18 country consultations between March and November 2011. The country consultations were intended to set the stage for an on-going dialogue on country ownership that could bring relevant stakeholders aboard and identify specific strategies to advance such ownership in the context of national AIDS responses.

The participating countries included: Benin, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Guyana, Kenya, Malawi (2010), Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Viet Nam. Similar consultations were held in Botswana and South Africa, under the stewardship of McKinsey/PEPFAR.

The consultations included a broad range of stakeholders, with representatives from government, civil society (especially organizations of people living with HIV), the private sector and development partners. The high attendance at the meetings (more than 100 participants in Burundi and Kenya, 90 in Sierra Leone, and 60 in Cambodia and Guatemala) illustrated the widespread interest in the issue.

Each of the consultations approached the issue within their specific national contexts. Beyond that, there was consensus about the importance of country ownership and that the concept clearly had to extend beyond governments and include civil society. There was agreement on the need to strengthen mutual accountability, along with recognition that responsibilities have to be shared more broadly.

This paper is based on the key findings from those meetings, but also draws on other global and regional experiences on country ownership. It is a contribution to the continuing dialogue on country ownership of the AIDS response and on the evolving meaning of this principle. It underscores the central importance of country ownership for sustaining an effective AIDS response and for meeting the 2011 UN Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS targets and commitments for 2015.

What is country ownership?

A country owned response harnesses diversified systems, capacities and financing arrangements, and hinges on the principles of shared responsibility and mutual accountability.

Especially notable during the consultations was the emergence of a more embracing and inclusive understanding of country ownership. A decade ago, the concept tended to revolve largely around governments as the chief “owners” and actors in an AIDS response. A much more participatory and inclusive understanding has evolved, one that incorporates a broad range of actors at all levels, particularly affected communities.

Thus country ownership is now understood to involve and protect the human rights of people living with HIV, and other affected communities (including sex workers, people who inject drugs, men who have sex with men and transgender people). Such commitment to inclusive leadership and the meaningful involvement of people living with and affected by HIV complements rather than contradicts the vital role of governments in the oversight and stewardship of the national response.¹

Another recurring theme during the consultations was the view that a definition of country ownership needs to be adaptable. It might vary slightly from place to place, depending on the social and political context, on the kind of epidemic that is underway, and on other factors. As a participant in one consultation put it, “*Country ownership is a process, not a static concept*”.

Why is country ownership important?

The 2011 United Nations Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS calls for much greater efforts to end the epidemic and ensure universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care services. Country ownership ranks among the vital means for reaching the goal of a effective, efficient and sustainable national AIDS response in which systems and resources are enhanced and put to optimal use.

An essential step toward that goal is the achievement of sustainable

¹ Accordingly, this paper uses the terms “country” and “countries” in a broad, inclusive sense. They refer to government and state institutions, civil society (especially community-based) organizations, networks of people living with HIV, and other nongovernmental organizations—all of which assume a shared responsibility in the AIDS response.

and predictable funding. It implies sharing the responsibility for resource mobilization in new ways. Specific arrangements would depend on the place. A country with a strong, surging economy, for example, may be able to significantly increase domestic funding of its AIDS response. Other countries may be able to draw on soft loans from regional banks, etc. At the same time sustained and increased international investments are necessary. Very few low- and middle-income countries can afford to fully fund their AIDS response from domestic resources. This flexible or contingent nature of country ownership was a recurring theme during the consultations.

Key elements of country ownership

No single definition of country ownership emerged from the consultations. But it was possible to discern a set of core elements for a country-owned response to AIDS. The elements build on the key concepts originally promoted in the “Three Ones” framework², and reflect experiences that are being gained as countries develop, implement and evaluate their national AIDS strategies (Figure1).

Strong political engagement and inclusive leadership

Strong political engagement and leadership at the national, provincial and local levels is an absolute prerequisite for ownership. This leadership is especially vital in those spheres where policies are decided, legislation is crafted, budgets are allocated and strategies are driven. But it also has to extend to the other levels of governance, and encompass other spheres of society (including religion and culture).

Full engagement of civil society, communities and people living with HIV

Inclusive leadership and commitment also entails creating an environment that enables effective programme activities (by ensuring, for example, that human rights are protected) and that facilitates meaningful engagement by civil society—especially people living with HIV and other affected communities. While governments bear the ultimate responsibility for the AIDS response, its success hinges on the full participation of empowered communities, and on their abilities to pressure governments and help drive strategies. In this sense, “country ownership” implies “people ownership”.

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² One agreed HIV/AIDS action framework that provides the basis for coordinating the work of all partners; One national AIDS coordinating authority, with a broad based multi-sector mandate; and One agreed country-level monitoring and evaluation system.

High-quality strategic information

National AIDS responses must be based on evidence-informed policies and strategies that emerge from quality epidemiological and programme data, and other pertinent information. Meaningful ownership therefore implies the capacity and the commitment to collect, analyse and apply such data to guide the strategic planning, resource allocation, programme implementation and adaptation of the AIDS response.

For countries to fully own their national AIDS responses, they need to have a clear understanding of the burden of disease, patterns of HIV transmission and key populations at increased risk for HIV infection. Without this information, it will be impossible to develop effective strategies to respond to AIDS. It is not possible for a country to own its response without effectively understanding its epidemic.

Robust national strategic plans with smart investment decisions

National strategic plans are the cornerstone of a country's AIDS response, and the use of inclusive and transparent processes to develop and implement them is fundamental to country ownership. The adoption of evidence-informed policy and legal reforms, combined with focused interventions to protect and promote human rights, are essential. Such reforms rarely succeed without the active support and involvement of civil society groupings and activist campaigns.

There is no “one-size fits all” strategy for responding to AIDS. National AIDS strategies must include interventions that are most effective in preventing new HIV infections, reducing HIV-related morbidity and mortality and decreasing stigma and discrimination. Countries must invest in those interventions that have the highest return on investment. Moreover, AIDS investments need to be efficient by achieving maximum impact for every dollar invested. By investing in the right things at the right places with the lowest possible unit cost, countries can move towards owning, leading and sustaining their national AIDS responses. In this regard, the UNAIDS investment tool can help countries make smart investment decisions.

Figure 1. Key Elements of Country Ownership



Strong partnerships with a “shared responsibility” and mutual accountability

Strong partnerships have been and will remain the backbone of national AIDS responses. The changing global environment and its demands for new and innovative ways of working, however, signal the need for different kinds of partnerships—ones that facilitate country ownership, leadership, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of national AIDS responses. There is a growing appreciation by countries, donors and other key stakeholders that responding to AIDS over the long-term requires a “shared responsibility”. Countries and their partners are acknowledging that “we are all in this together” with each partner making specific commitments and contributions to support the response and all partners are fully accountable for fulfilling their commitments.

The principle of “shared responsibility” includes the need for countries to achieve stable and predictable financial flows, from both domestic and international sources. The consultations made it clear, however, that greater country ownership should not become a pretext for high-income countries to retreat from their obligations to low- and middle-income countries

Shared responsibility and global solidarity for the AIDS response rests on three premises: (1) Countries demonstrate political leadership through a willingness and ability to articulate a national AIDS, health and development vision and pull partner efforts in alignment; (2) Development partners and governments fill the HIV investment gap together, through traditional and innovative means, investing their “fair share” based on ability and prior commitments; and (3) Resources are reallocated according to countries’ needs and priorities – among countries, programmes and populations – for

greatest results, ensuring rights-based enablers and synergies.

Effective coordination

The complexity of the coordination challenge, and the extent to which it determines a country's ability to lead its AIDS response, was a frequent theme during the consultations. Inclusive processes and transparency facilitate more effective and efficient collaboration between the many diverse stakeholders involved in a country's AIDS response. As the architects and custodians of the national AIDS strategy, the various stakeholders in a country are therefore jointly responsible for implementing their national AIDS response. The involvement of people living with HIV and other affected communities must go beyond consultation: it entails participation in designing, implementing and monitoring the plan. Such participation is especially valuable for strengthening the *enabling factors* that can bring long-term success (for instance, protecting human rights, reducing stigma and discrimination against key affected populations, mobilizing and supporting community-based activities, etc.).

Transparency throughout planning and implementation promotes mutual accountability among stakeholders and allows communities and citizens to monitor service delivery, expenditure flows and implementation bottlenecks. Problem solving and innovation need to be opened up and democratized so that programmes can also benefit from the ways in which people and communities fashion their own solutions.

Capacity development

Greater country ownership goes hand-in-hand with ensuring that countries have sufficient capabilities to exercise that ownership. This includes the capacity to track and understand the epidemic's patterns and trends, and to plan, manage, and monitor implementation of the AIDS strategy effectively. Where capacities are lacking, technical support becomes vital—both in the shape of short-term assistance to bridge gaps urgently, and as longer-term capacity development. The emphasis throughout has to be on strengthening local institutions and systems. Country consultations emphasized the need to source such support as much as possible in-country or via South-South cooperation.

Integration of HIV into health and development strategies

The AIDS response has begun to successfully position itself as integral to wider development and human rights efforts. The response also has to be better integrated into countries' broader health and development processes. An inclusive form of country ownership can help harness some of this overlapping potential for progress.

Improved integration of HIV programmes with TB treatment services, maternal and child health services, sexual and reproductive health and non-communicable chronic disease services can more fully leverage AIDS resources and exploit synergies. At the policy level, positioning national AIDS strategies within broader development strategies reinforces country ownership and long-term commitment to the AIDS response.

Additional factors affecting country ownership

During the consultations a range of factors that affect the quest for greater country ownership were debated. Some of those factors were seen to be encouraging or facilitating that quest; others were viewed as hindrances. The factors include:

- The flattening of donor funding going toward the AIDS response;
- Countries are coming to terms with the need to develop solid and transparent management and accountability frameworks for all stakeholders in the AIDS response. A big challenge is how to achieve frameworks that encompass the various zones of stakeholders— national and sub-national state institutions, donors and development partners and local or community-based organizations—and that capture the various lines of accountability between them.
- Many countries lack sufficient data and information concerning their HIV epidemics and responses. This is especially true for data relating to performance, impact and cost-effectiveness, but also includes epidemiological data that are needed to design and update effective, focused AIDS programs.
- There is a pressing need to accurately assess capabilities, solicit appropriate forms of technical support and introduce capacity development strategies that can help achieve long-term sustainability.
- Greater South-South cooperation is seen as essential in all these (and other) respects. Examples of such cooperation are on the increase, but they are not yet the norm, and there remains a tendency (not only among donors) to look chiefly toward high-income countries for funding, technical support and other assistance

Moving Forward

The country consultations provided critical information concerning the importance of country ownership/leadership in providing a solid foundation for developing effective, efficient and sustainable national AIDS responses. Country ownership was not felt to be a goal in itself; rather it was seen as a means to an end of achieving the goal of sustainability. While country ownership alone does not assure sustainability, without ownership, sustainability will remain elusive.

Although the consultations did not arrive at a universal definition for ownership, they provided useful information about the key elements that are needed for countries to move towards ownership and sustainability of their national AIDS responses. These elements are briefly recapitulated below:

- **Strong political leadership** is critical in identifying AIDS as a national priority and providing a clear vision of goals and objectives for responding to AIDS and providing leadership and oversight of the response at the national, provincial and district levels.
- **Civil society organizations, communities and people living with HIV must be fully engaged** in all aspects of the AIDS response from assessing the epidemic, developing strategies and plans, implementation and monitoring the response.
- Countries must have a **full understanding of their HIV epidemics** and accordingly develop **appropriate national strategies** using a strategic investment approach. Based on specific patterns of HIV transmission, the national strategy must identify those interventions that are most effective and have the highest return on investment.
- Sustainability requires acknowledgement that responding to AIDS is a “**shared responsibility**” between countries and their partners. Countries must provide overall leadership, governance, coordination and oversight of AIDS responses. Development partners and countries need to work together to assure that **adequate and predictable financing** is available from both domestic and international sources.
- Countries must have the managerial skills and technical ability to lead and sustain their national AIDS responses over time. Countries and partners need to work together to identify current capability gaps and develop short-term **technical support** and long-term **capacity development** plans.

- Continued efforts are needed to **bring AIDS out of isolation**. For sustainability, HIV prevention, treatment and care services cannot continue to be stand-alone, off-budget programmes. HIV activities need to be better integrated with existing health and social welfare services, including maternal and child health, sexual and reproductive health, tuberculosis and chronic disease treatment services.

The country ownership consultations reinforced the importance of country ownership and leadership as the foundation for developing effective, efficient and sustainable national responses to AIDS. UNAIDS is committed to supporting countries to leverage better, more inclusive, more equitable, more effective, more efficient and more sustainable AIDS responses. By fully owning and leading their national AIDS responses, countries can move towards achieving UNAIDS' vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths.

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Country Ownership and Broader Development Efforts

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), the Accra Agenda for Action (2008) and the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2011) embody an ongoing paradigm shift in development policy, giving central importance to the principle of country ownership and leadership in the design and implementation of national development strategies. Negotiated by Ministers responsible for promoting development, as well as heads of multilateral and bilateral development institutions, the statements specifically call for broadening country-level dialogue on development with key stakeholders, including civil society organizations and people living with HIV.

To achieve the goals of improved effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of development aid, the agreements call for: country ownership; better alignment of donor support with country-developed strategies; donor harmonization; increased emphasis on results-based management; and mutual accountability and transparency in the use of development resources.

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