Achieving the health MDGs: country ownership in four steps

This week (Sept 20–22), world leaders gathered in New York, NY, USA, to give a final push to accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to which they committed in 2000. Although some progress has been made, a new approach is sorely needed if countries are to achieve MDG targets by 2015.

There has been much debate in the global health community on how best to accelerate positive health outcomes. The notion of country ownership has surfaced in many of these conversations. Country ownership is the surest way for developing countries to chart their own course of development and overcome the challenges they face in building effective and productive states. But what exactly do we mean by country ownership?

Drawing on our experiences in Ethiopia, I can point to four key steps for making country ownership a reality.

The first step is planning. Countries must start with a clear development vision, but they also need to elaborate a detailed roadmap for realising it. In Ethiopia, our vision is to become a middle-income country over the next 10–15 years, and our government has clearly articulated strategies for how to get there. For country ownership to be realised, development partners must allow countries the space to identify their own needs and priorities, and develop their own plans as they see fit. But countries should also be open to ideas and seek to tailor proven practices to their particular circumstances. Once a well-considered national plan is in place, however, partners need to support that plan if country ownership is to thrive. We remained open to ideas throughout the planning process. We invited partners’ contributions and benchmarked best practices from other countries. This is the most decisive step towards real ownership.

The second step is resourcing the plan. Here too, countries must take the lead. And because resources are limited, careful prioritisation is crucial. In crafting our health plan, we defined two alternative versions. If resource constraints mean that we cannot implement our broader and more ambitious plan, we go with our contingency plan, which focuses on the most pressing priorities. But countries should also be open to ideas and seek to tailor proven practices to their particular circumstances. Once a well-considered national plan is in place, however, partners need to support that plan if country ownership is to thrive. We remained open to ideas throughout the planning process. We invited partners’ contributions and benchmarked best practices from other countries. This is the most decisive step towards real ownership.

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The third step is implementation, in which countries must also be fully engaged. Some have argued that countries lack the capacity to implement. If so, the most efficient and sustainable solution is for partners to strengthen existing capacities within the country rather than replacing them with parallel structures. If existing national systems and procedures are inadequate, partners should work with countries to fix them.

The fourth step is monitoring and evaluation. Partners should also help countries to build their capacities to track performance. Mutual accountability between countries and partners requires a solid results-based framework, premised on clear outcome targets that must be defined and agreed at the outset.
Ownership reinforces commitment. And commitment, in turn, yields results and assures long-term sustainability. In Ethiopia, we could not have achieved such encouraging progress in our health sector without this type of genuine ownership and the space to pursue an approach to service delivery on the basis of health-system strengthening.

These practical steps towards country ownership are neither new nor particularly difficult to understand. Countries simply must own all these stages for the effect of development aid to be maximised. What seems to be missing is partners’ full commitment to country ownership. Partners have a wide range of interests that hinder them from fully embracing country-led processes. But a decisive shift has to happen now if the MDG targets are to be reached. We urge all development partners to move forward in a new spirit of candour and partnership to make country ownership a reality. That way, achieving the MDGs will become reality too.

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