

Country ownership and accountability

Francis Omaswa issues a plea for governments to recognise their health obligations, for civil society to blossom, and for international partners to allow home-grown solutions to prevail



African people like any others in the world are entitled to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health as one of the fundamental rights of every human being.¹ For this to happen, effective health systems that work for the entire population are needed in each and every country. Governments have the primary responsibility for assuring that there are effective health systems and that services are made available either as a direct provider, a regulator, or a coordinator. These are responsibilities of the state that cannot be delegated. Governments around the world are expected, indeed required to be stewards, or protectors, of the public interest and have the ultimate responsibility for assuring conditions that allow people to be as healthy as they can be. Stewardship and leadership is one of the central building blocks of an effective health system.²

Country ownership in this context means that governments recognise and accept that they are accountable for the health of their populations and have the ultimate responsibility to do all in their power, on their own, and with the active participation of the people and in collaboration with external partners as needed. The foundation that makes country ownership an imperative is the thesis that sustainable change is endogenous and must come from within the country, the community and the people who benefit from the change. 'Only that change that comes from the communities themselves is sustainable.'³ Due to a variety of factors such as economic collapse, poor governance, the cold war, and devastating epidemics and famine, Africa has become a continent for global pity and deemed not to be able to take care of itself and in need of outside help for both resources and worse still for ideas and solutions as well. This is what we need to change, to make Africans regain confidence in themselves and know that it is up them to lead and cause the change that they desire. Friends and partners from outside only come to help.

The challenge of realising and demonstrating country ownership has three sets of actors. The first are African governments. African political leaders collectively through the African Union and sub-regional groupings have demonstrated commitment reflected in the several summits they have held on Africa's health.

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Examples include several Abuja summits on HIV and other infectious diseases, on malaria and recently the Neonatal, Child and Maternal Health summit in July in Kampala; there is also now an African Union Health Strategy. However, there is a huge implementation gap for those many resolutions and declarations and African health indices are not good with only a few countries on target to achieve the MDGs. Stronger governments are essential for Africa to transform. The second actor is African Civil Society.⁴ The demand side for good governance and better health systems needs to come from the people so that these issues become the ones against which elections are lost and won and against which accountability by governments can be monitored and enforced. It is not in the interest of most governments to have strong civil society that hold them to account but good governments should be prepared to support and fund civil society and human rights activists in their countries as partners and not adversaries. The third actor is the international community. The last decade has seen most developed countries supporting country ownership as evidenced by principles in Swaps, the Paris and Accra declarations, and IHP+. The government of the USA through the Global Health Initiative now embraces shared responsibility and country ownership as a central tenet of its foreign policy. There is a large and active movement of international civil society organisations that are active in African health. Some of these acknowledge and support country ownership. Unfortunately we are struggling with others who see African counterparts as enclaves to extend their own missions and are very patronising. The encouraging global movement in support of country ownership should provide Africans with the space that we have been clamouring for to demonstrate that we care about our people and are accountable to them. This is an opportunity which African governments, civil society, and our global partners should take full advantage to generate and entrench internally generated and sustained transformation in the way we govern ourselves and enjoy the highest attainable standard of health like other people in the world.

References

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