

When corruption is the norm

Corruption, broadly defined as the use of public office for private gain, exists in many forms. Bribery, fraud, extortion, influence peddling, kickbacks, cronyism, nepotism, patronage, embezzlement, vote buying, and election rigging are all examples of actions that fit under that umbrella term (see UNDP 2008 for full typology of types of corruption). A common response to all forms of corruption is to view them as acts committed by autonomous individuals: a bureaucrat takes a bribe; a traffic cop shakes down a driver; a judge sells his decision. A focus on deterring individual corrupt acts provides a powerful foundation for reform, yet misses the social element that makes corruption a persistent problem.

Corruption in the social sense is a shared belief that using public office to benefit oneself and one's family and friends is widespread, expected, and tolerated. In other words, corruption can be a social norm. Moreover, it has been the default social norm throughout much of history. Only gradually has the principle of equal treatment for all before the law emerged, and in most states it is still a work in progress (Mungiu-Pippidi 2013).

Social expectations and mental models perpetuate corruption

It is important to understand how the decision to engage in corruption takes place in the mind of a public official. If people believe that the purpose of obtaining office is to provide one's family and friends with money, goods, favors, or appointments, then social networks can perpetuate the norm of corruption. Social networks can even serve as a source of punishment for public servants who violate that norm. In Uganda, for instance, reciprocal obligations of kinship and community loyalty may have contributed to a governance outcome in which public officials needed to use their position to benefit their network in order to be regarded as good people (Fjeldstad 2005). Holders of public positions who did not use their influence to assist friends and relatives risked derision and disrespect (Fjeldstad, Kolstad, and Lange 2003).

Even people who privately deplore a norm of corruption might go along with it publicly because of perceived social pressure in support of the system. Since people who express different opinions may find themselves treated as outsiders, they will often choose to express support for the status quo simply to avoid the costs of being different (Kuran 1997). Thus societies can get stuck in an equilibrium in which corruption is the norm, even though privately much of the population would prefer a clean public service.

Social pressures can force even clean officials to capitulate. In China, for instance, a local official was hounded by villagers who pressured him to accept gifts every time he went home. Told he would be unable to get anything accomplished politically by refusing, the official capitulated. He was later arrested on charges of corruption (McGregor 2010). Similarly, a study of India between

1976 and 1982 found that refusing to grant favors could subject a public official to complaints filed by constituents. The norm of corruption was so entrenched that the social meaning of an honest official was someone who demanded no more than the going rate as a bribe for providing a public service (Wade 1985).

Pressure to engage in corruption often comes from within the bureaucracy. In the Indian example, a highly institutionalized informal system had developed for the purchase of transfers from one position to another, with the price dependent on how much the officeholder could expect to extract from his constituents for providing agricultural services: "By long-established convention, 8½ percent of each contract is kicked back to the officers and clerical staff of the Division—2½ percent to the [executive engineer] . . . 1 percent to the clerical staff and draughtsmen, and 5 percent to the Supervisor and [assistant engineer] to be split between them" (Wade 1982, 292–93). Officials who did not participate risked punishment: supervisors developed a code language to use in reports to the authorities in charge of promotions to indicate officers who were not willing to extract side payments, identifying them as "tactless," "having no grip over the people," or "unable to manage" (Wade 1985, 483). Those who resisted might be coaxed into compliance with stories about how the bribes received were "gifts" from farmers grateful for how hard they were working on their behalf (Wade 1982). Ironically, officials who resisted the system might be threatened with bogus public charges of corruption to encourage them to fall into line (Bayley 1966).

These types of social expectations can become internalized, as demonstrated in a study that found that when diplomatic immunity meant they had no legal obligation to pay for parking violations in New York City, diplomats from countries where corruption is high had significantly more unpaid fines than those from countries where corruption is low (Fisman and Miguel 2007). The finding that country of origin can predict corrupt actions has been replicated (Barr and Serra 2010) and suggests that corruption is at least in part associated with social norms.

Strategies to address corruption

Where corruption is common, acting corruptly may become automatic thinking for officials. If so, an appropriate countermeasure might be to create novel situations to get them to think deliberately about their behavior and reassess their attitudes and mental models about public service. When a nongovernmental organization (NGO) called 5th Pillar created a zero-rupee note in India with the inscription "I promise to neither accept nor give a bribe" for people to hand out when asked for bribes, one official was supposedly "so stunned to receive the note that he handed back all the bribes he had solicited for providing electricity to a village." Another "stood up, offered tea to the woman from whom he was trying to extort money,

and approved a loan so her granddaughter could go to college” (Panth 2011, 21).

Because people behave differently in private from how they behave when they are (or think they are) being observed, transforming opaque corrupt acts into public behavior may exert social pressure on officials to uphold their positions as intended. Low-cost Internet platforms such as *ipaidabribe.com*, an NGO initiative by Janaagraha in India, have made it easier for citizens to publicize and stigmatize bribery and shame public servants who solicit bribes, although the impact of such social media initiatives has yet to be evaluated. Newspapers also can make corrupt behavior public and empower citizens with information to monitor officials. In Uganda, corruption by officials was so extensive that local schools were receiving only 24 percent, on average, of the central government grants to which they were entitled, until newspapers began publishing the actual amounts the schools were supposed to receive. As a result, average funding received by the schools increased to 80 percent of the entitled amount (Reinikka and Svensson 2005).

The persistent nature of long-held mental models may make it challenging to convince the public that governance reforms are real. Thus anticorruption campaigns may be more successful when their enforcement is highly conspicuous, especially when public enforcement action is taken against politically powerful individuals widely believed to be above the law (Rothstein 2005). As an example, when the government of Georgia decided to crack down on organized crime, it televised “truckloads of heavily armed police in ski masks round[ing] up high-profile crime bosses” (World Bank 2012, 15). Social marketing campaigns to advertise anticorruption efforts, as well as targeting areas where the government can achieve “quick wins” of easily observable reductions in corruption, might be another way to build citizen support and start shifting public perceptions (Recanatini 2013). In Georgia, a public relations campaign to advertise the reformed traffic safety police included brand-new uniforms, remodeled police buildings that were open and full of windows to indicate transparency, and television commercials portraying civil servants as good people (World Bank 2012). As the headline of a magazine article explaining the anticorruption efforts in Georgia noted, the process involved a “mental revolution” (*Economist* 2010). Seeing things differently may be a critical component of doing things differently.

Viewed through a social lens, changing a social norm about corruption constitutes a collective action problem rather than simply the repression of deviant behavior (Mungiu-Pippidi 2013). Establishing social action coalitions to unite and mobilize public and private actors with overlapping political interests is one promising strategy that has been pursued in Ghana and in Bangalore, India. Providing nonmaterial incentives for participation, such as a shared sense of purpose, feelings of solidarity, and public prestige, may be particularly important to sustaining a broad coalition with varied interests (Johnston and Kpundeh 2004). The Internet may make it easier for dispersed interests to organize. In Brazil, the campaign at *avaaz.org* collected signatures from 3 million citizens and may have encouraged the legislature to pass a bill preventing candidates with criminal records from running for office (Panth 2011).

As this Report argues, fostering collective action is not purely a matter of incentivizing self-interested individuals. People can be intrinsically motivated to cooperate and to punish norm violators. In fact, as experimental findings show, “a social norm, especially where there is communication between parties, can work as well or nearly as well at generating cooperative behavior as an externally imposed set of rules and system of monitoring and sanctioning” (Ostrom 2000). Practitioners wishing to fight corruption might therefore wish to experiment with campaigns that emphasize the social norm of clean government.

References

- Barr, Abigail, and Danila Serra. 2010. “Corruption and Culture: An Experimental Analysis.” *Journal of Public Economics* 94 (11): 862–69.
- Bayley, David H. 1966. “The Effects of Corruption in a Developing Nation.” *Political Research Quarterly* 19 (4): 719–32.
- Economist*. 2010. “Georgia’s Mental Revolution.” August 19.
- Fisman, Raymond, and Edward Miguel. 2007. “Corruption, Norms, and Legal Enforcement: Evidence from Diplomatic Parking Tickets.” *Journal of Political Economy* 115 (6): 1020–48.
- Fjeldstad, Odd-Helge. 2005. “Corruption in Tax Administration: Lessons from Institutional Reforms in Uganda.” Working Paper 2005: 10, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway.
- Fjeldstad, Odd-Helge, Ivar Kolstad, and Siri Lange. 2003. *Autonomy, Incentives and Patronage: A Study of Corruption in the Tanzania and Uganda Revenue Authorities*. CMI Report 2003: 9, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway.
- Johnston, Michael, and Sahr John Kpundeh. 2004. *Building a Clean Machine: Anti-Corruption Coalitions and Sustainable Reform*, Vol. 3466. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Kuran, Timur. 1997. *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McGregor, Richard. 2010. *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers*. London: Penguin UK.
- Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina. 2013. “Becoming Denmark: Historical Designs of Corruption Control.” *Social Research* 80 (4): 1259–86.
- Ostrom, Elinor. 2000. “Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14 (3): 137–58.
- Panth, Sabina. 2011. “Changing Norms Is Key to Fighting Everyday Corruption.” CommGAP Discussion Papers, Communication for Governance and Accountability Program, World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Recanatini, Francesca. 2013. “Tackling Corruption and Promoting Better Governance: The Road Ahead.” In *Anticorruption Policy: Can International Actors Play a Role?* edited by Susan Rose Ackerman and Paul Carrington, 55–71. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Reinikka, Ritva, and Jakob Svensson. 2005. “Fighting Corruption to Improve Schooling: Evidence from a Newspaper Campaign in Uganda.” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 3 (23): 259–67.
- Rothstein, Bo, ed. 2005. *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2008. *Corruption and Development: A Primer*. New York: UNDP.
- Wade, Robert. 1982. “The System of Administrative and Political Corruption: Canal Irrigation in South India.” *Journal of Development Studies* 18 (3): 287–328.
- . 1985. “The Market for Public Office: Why the Indian State Is Not Better at Development.” *World Development* 13 (4): 467–97.
- World Bank. 2012. *Fighting Corruption in Public Services: Chronically Georgia’s Reforms*. Directions in Development: Public Sector Governance. Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/book/10.1596/978-0-8213-9475-5>.