

What Works in Fighting Corruption: Making Sense of Evidence-Based Findings

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Policymakers, international donors, implementing partners and researchers are all intensely interested in finding out what initiatives work successfully to combat corruption. We're just getting to the point of finding answers.

Since the mid-1990s, there have been many interventions worldwide – some explicitly anticorruption, some using other terminology but implicitly focused on corruption, and some subsumed under larger programs. However, there is no single database that gathers together the results of these efforts and no integrative and systematic analysis of what actions promote effective anticorruption reform. Even if there were, most of these programs employed inadequate techniques of measuring, assessing and evaluating their impact on corrupt practices. As a result, most of the existing literature on these anticorruption interventions is anecdotal in nature, presenting the outcomes of single case studies to demonstrate impact

After 20 years of anticorruption programming, USAID and DFID commissioned several systematic



studies to assess what initiatives have proven to be effective.¹ They developed and analyzed databases of past projects on which sufficient measurement exists or conducted comparative case analyses of similar interventions to determine if there is a firm foundation to guide future anti-corruption programming based on past results.²

- 1 Four meta-analysis studies serve as the basis for our assessment: USAID (2015) Practitioner's Guide for Anticorruption Programming. Washington, DC: USAID (authored by MSI); DFID (2015) Why corruption matters: understanding causes, effects and how to address them: Evidence Paper on Corruption (January), London: DFID; Hanna, R., Bishop, S., Nadel, S., Scheffler, G, Durlacher, K. (2011) The effectiveness of anti-corruption policy: what has worked, what hasn't, and what we don't know—a systematic review. Technical report. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London (supported by DFID); and Johnson, Jesper, N. Taxell and D. Zaum (2012) Mapping evidence gaps in anti-corruption: Assessing the state of the operationally relevant evidence on donors' actions and approaches to reducing corruption. Bergen, Norway: U4 Issue No. 7 (supported by DFID).
- 2 Other recent reports have claimed to review what interventions work, but have employed more anecdotal, less systematic methodologies; they are not included in our assessment. These include studies sponsored by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), the World Bank, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

MSI has merged the findings from these meta-analyses, sorting and presenting them below.

- We have focused only on the results that confirmed effective outcomes for specific types of anticorruption interventions. There are many more findings that focus on how best to assess the situation, how to select goals and strategies, how to identify effective entry points and how to design programs, but these are not included in this research note.
- Many findings indicated mixed results, that is, some implementations showed success while others showed failure or inconclusive impacts. These results are not presented here.
- Moreover, because of the widespread absence of impact data, the findings presented here are based on only a small subsample of actual interventions that have been attempted over the past 20 years.

Major Findings

While most of the findings are not particularly unexpected, it is noteworthy that many popularly used programs are not in the list due to mixed or failed results. In particular, we can draw the following conclusions:

- More complex interventions appear to fare better at achieving sustained reduced corruption. Reform efforts are more effective when they are conducted in combination with other reform efforts – like strengthening audits plus publicizing sanctions or decentralization activities along with CSO capacity building in oversight

to keep local officials accountable. So, achieving effective anticorruption results appears to benefit from judiciously designing initiatives in a “checks and balances” fashion. For example, if you are trying to reform governance practices to reduce their vulnerability to corruption, it benefits to do so in combination with promoting negative sanctions if officials abuse their authority. Or if you are trying to reduce corruption by reducing the concentration of power in the central government, it is wise to simultaneously ensure that local officials know that their actions will be closely monitored by watchdogs.

- When programming interventions, it is crucial to consider the conditions under which they will be implemented. Capacity, sustainable funding sources, political will, freedom of the press, and community engagement, among others, play important roles in supporting and strengthening the focused intervention. Conducting and revising Political Economy Analyses (PEA) on a regular basis will support implementers to understand the complex situational dynamics that can influence accomplishment of goals.
- Another condition that impacts effective results is the sector within which the intervention is implemented. Success depends on the readiness of the sector – its leadership, legal framework, institutional setup, practices and procedures, interface with citizens and business, resources, capacity, etc. – to accept the implemented reform. Again, periodic PEAs will be able to inform implementers on these conditions.

Table 1. What Works

(In addition to general findings, sector-specific findings related to anticorruption initiatives in the health and education sectors are also noted below.)

CATEGORY	WHAT WORKS	SOURCE
Anticorruption Agencies (ACA)	Promote ACAs to be independent, well-resourced and coordinated with government and non-government actors that aim to curb corruption.	DFID 2015
	Support supreme audit institutions in using specialized forensic or performance audits in combination with strengthening punitive sanctions and encouraging them to develop good relations with parliamentary public accounts committees (i.e. with the legislature) and to work closely with civil society and the media.	DFID 2015
Audit/Oversight	Strengthen monitoring and oversight mechanisms, in combination with incentives, such as the likelihood of being caught.	Hanna, et al. 2011
	Health: Conduct frequent audits with sanctions for staff in the health sector	USAID 2015
	Education: Conduct audits and accountability systems to deal with absentee and ghost employees in the education sector	USAID 2015
	Education: Increase oversight and audit capacities of education inspector general	USAID 2015
	Education: Conduct oversight and accountability for teacher certifications	USAID 2015
Civic Engagement	Strengthen CSOs to engage in accountability activities, advocacy and participatory budgeting, when the following conditions are present: they have the capacity to influence service providers, there is an independent and free media, there is a combination of broad-based community mobilization with professionalized CSOs, and there is engagement between state and civil society actors.	DFID 2015; Johnson, et al. 2012; Hanna, et al. 2011
Civil Service	Implement merit-based recruitment	DFID 2015
	Increase compensation and wage levels in public sector in close coordination with making other reforms that control/oversee civil servant behavior to curb discretion	DFID 2015

CATEGORY	WHAT WORKS	SOURCE
Decentralization	Support decentralization in combination with empowering program beneficiaries to hold decision-makers and service providers accountable, where there is both significant local capacity to deliver services and high levels of community oversight and participation.	DFID 2015; Hanna, et al. 2011
Fragile States	Implement anticorruption interventions soon after signing peace agreements to take advantage of changed environment, but assess situation to avoid doing harm	USAID 2015
Gender	Promote higher representation of women in government	DFID 2015
Governance	Conduct streamlining and standardization of government processes, including one-stop shops, e-government and regulatory simplification initiatives.	USAID 2015
	Education: Standardize compliance with existing education laws and decrease arbitrary decisions and excessive bureaucratic discretion	USAID 2015
	Education: Monitor and enforce codes of ethics for teachers and administrators	USAID 2015
Judiciary	Promote initiatives to strengthen the independence of the judiciary	Johnson, et al. 2012
Media	Support freedom of the press and the media's role in promoting social accountability mechanisms, in combination with empowering the community and increasing the negative incentive of sanctions.	DFID 2015; Johnson, et al. 2012; Hanna, et al. 2011
Multilateral Initiatives	Encourage country participation in multilateral transparency initiatives, like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)	USAID 2015
Public Financial Management (PFM)	Support PFM reforms, such as budget tracking, in coordination with engaging citizens to conduct oversight of expenditures	DFID 2015; Johnson, et al. 2012; USAID 2015
	Strengthen budget planning and management in the central public administration, often with the ministry of finance at the core, in combination with strong participation of external stakeholders in budget planning	DFID 2015
	Encourage reforms to tax and revenue services	Johnson, et al. 2012

CATEGORY	WHAT WORKS	SOURCE
Privatization	Health: Support contracting out to private sources for health care services because it is easier to hold contractors accountable than it is for public workers	USAID 2015
Procurement	Implement procurement reforms especially in combination with strengthened monitoring, oversight and transparency reforms	DFID 2015; Johnson, et al. 2012
	Education: Implement procurement reform in the education sector to reduce discretionary decisions, and increase competition and adherence to law.	USAID 2015
	Health: Establish clear procurement and contracting rules in the health sector	USAID 2015
Social Accountability	Strengthen social accountability initiatives with citizens that enhance state or institutional responsiveness, build new democratic spaces for citizen engagement, empower local voices, better utilize budgets and better deliver services. Support social accountability and community monitoring initiatives when critical conditions are present, such as issues that are relevant to the targeted population; relatively homogenous populations; populations that are empowered and have the capacity to hold institutions accountable and withstand elite capture; synergies and coalitions between different actors; alignment between social accountability and other reforms and monitoring mechanisms; credible sanctions; and functional and responsive state institutions.	DFID 2015
	Health: Strengthen community monitoring to engage citizens in health sector oversight	USAID 2015
	Education: Ensure that schools agree to delegate oversight functions to teacher organizations and that their scorecards employ evidence-based impact evaluation approaches	USAID 2015
Technology	Support development of technological approaches that effectively reduce bureaucratic discretion	USAID 2015
Transparency	Support transparency initiatives to improve institutional responsiveness, citizen engagement and empowerment, enhanced budget utilization, and delivery of services.	DFID 2015

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