

Breaking the Corruption Cycle: “Aggressive Accountability”

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December 9 is known as International Anticorruption Day, commemorating the passage of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) in 2003. It is a time for governments and the general public to reassert their commitment to breaking the cycle of corruption that hurts poor people disproportionately, contributes to instability and poverty, and drives fragile countries towards state failure. Over the years, many country signatories have recognized the day with speeches and workshops. Citizen groups have organized information campaigns and rallies to strengthen public awareness of the corruption problem in their countries. Many donor-supported anticorruption programs work hand-in-hand with both governments and citizen groups to enhance the impact of these events.

This year, Anticorruption Day focuses on how corruption serves as one of the biggest obstacles to achieving the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. The UN offers a [Call for Action Matrix](#) to help government officials and citizens target their future initiatives effectively.

Despite the significance of UNCAC and Anticorruption Day for reinvigorating focused campaigns, it’s important to step back and think about why past efforts have not been so successful. Certainly, the negative impacts of corruption and the importance of ethical standards have been widely discussed since biblical times, but that has not stopped the widespread practice of corruption. Nor has it affected a common belief by officials and the public in many countries that despite what the law says, corruption is just routine and acceptable behavior – the common way of life. With this mindset, it is hard to break the corruption cycle.



Officials use their positions to raise their salaries and beyond. The public does not consider corruption corrupt if it does them good. And they turn a blind eye – or feel powerless – when it comes to grand corruption.

No anticorruption approach has been tested and proven to be effective 100 percent of the time. But there are some lessons that have been learned about what “line of attack” might work much of the time to reduce corrupt tendencies¹ – and to break this deeply embedded corruption cycle.

It’s a three-step integrated process that we call “Aggressive Accountability.”

1. Recognize the problem through behavioral engagement. Citizens and government officials must recognize the problem for what it is. It’s a two-way street. Not only do officials act corruptly, but citizens do as well. Recent surveys in Indonesia and Ukraine show that the public often accepts corrupt behavior as common, acceptable and legitimate. They have lived their lives seeing corruption and abuse of power as the norm and their role models have reinforced this belief. It’s hard for them to see alternative ways of behaving. With this mindset, citizens become complicit with officials’ use of corrupt practices. It seems acceptable to use corruption to benefit themselves, friends and family – even to the detriment of others. And officials will continue to use corrupt ways for self-benefit because they’ve seen many others do it, fearing no detection or punishment.

The best initiatives to promote recognition of corruption as a problem have to go beyond typical public awareness campaigns. They need to engage citizens in a behavioral way. Passive

approaches – like billboards, flyers and TV/radio messages – are not sufficient. Rather, after learning about what constitutes corruption, citizens and officials need to engage in open and participatory dialogues, community discussion groups or collective projects, for example. The idea is to find ways for citizens and officials to talk and act, not only listen.

2. Aggressive Oversight. Citizens and government need to initiate proactive oversight tactics. At the heart of these approaches is making it clear that public servants are being watched and any corrupt or abusive practices will be detected, addressed and punished. Oversight can be conducted by government bodies through internal control units within departments or ministries, by supreme audit bodies or by inspector general offices. Watchdogs can also be established by citizen groups using social audit and accountability techniques. Transparency and open data approaches can also provide citizens with a clear idea of how government decisions are being made and how public funds are being spent.

3. Consequences for Observed Corruption. What should be done with this information collected by oversight groups? It needs to be put to use in very transparent ways to reduce corruption and/or punish abusers. The media can be mobilized to publish investigative reports. Citizen review boards can be set up within agencies to examine and act upon the resulting information. Citizen

¹ USAID (2015) Practitioner’s Guide for Anticorruption Programming (authored by MSI): http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00K7PG.pdf

complaint systems can be used to rectify uncovered problems with assured follow-up and feedback. In some cases, negative incentives – such as “naming and shaming” – can produce quick and effective results, but positive incentives like bonuses and awards are preferable when honest behavior is observed. Ultimately, formal investigations leading to legal proceedings can be initiated to indict and convict corrupt officials. Sometimes, just the threat of predictable punishment can have an immediate effect on putting a halt to corruption abuses.

This Aggressive Accountability approach takes most anticorruption programs a step or two further than the ordinary. It directly engages the public

and officials. It institutes multiple ways to watch and oversee official behavior. And it uses resulting information to take visible steps to reduce and punish corrupt practices. This follow-through is critical to success, but so are the powerful oversight activities. If officials know they are really being watched and there is a predictable threat that they will be punished if they don't stop, it is likely that their corrupt tendencies will be reduced quickly. Such a carefully planned and implemented set of integrated initiatives – focusing on accountability – may possess the power to break the tough and persistent corruption cycle.

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