How to Self-Assess Anticorruption Progress: An Adaptive Programming Tool for USAID Missions

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Effective programming depends on good assessments of past activities and the current situation in a country. But many anticorruption initiatives are designed based on questionable measurement of corruption trends and perceptual surveys and indices. Our field research demonstrates that looking at the other side of the coin – monitoring the progress a country makes in implementing governance reforms – may be a better approach. Our checklist is easy for resident Mission staff to use as a self-monitoring device and it results in targeted programming ideas to fill gaps.

A few years ago, Management Systems International (MSI) developed a rapid corruption self-assessment checklist and piloted it with 16 USAID missions for the USAID Africa Bureau.[1] The tool is designed for Mission staff – sometimes with the help of local experts – to easily assess the extent to which countries have made progress not only in putting in place the appropriate anticorruption laws, institutions and programs, but also implementing them effectively to achieve impact. Rather than focus on trends in corruption levels (usually based on surveys and broadly based indexes), which do not provide specifics in terms of the factors contributing to increasing or decreasing trends, this checklist asks pointed questions about how effective countries have been in actually implementing partiuclar types of reforms. Based on this information,

Missions can program for anticorruption activities appropriately. The tool is easy enough for USAID Missions to collect data on a continuing basis to learn and adapt their programs to changing situations.

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1 Management Systems International (2007) A Rapid Anti-Corruption Assessment Technique for USAID/Africa: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadi164.pdf

The Checklist

The checklist assessment tool covers five broad categories of activity: the legal environment, enforcement, government oversight, budgets and public expenditures, and civil society, media and private sector activity. Across these categories, the checklist includes 119 questions on 31 specific areas. It digs down to gather information about the breadth and depth of anticorruption programs – on paper and in action. The questions are divided between those that ask for factual information (e.g., does a certain law exist?) and expert judgment (e.g., is the law being effectively enforced?). All questions require either yes/no answers or a rating scale (1-5).

For each participating country, a score is calculated for each of the five categories in the checklist. The score runs from 1 to 5, where a score of 5 indicates that a country has implemented all reform programs and a score of 1 indicates that none of the reform programs are implemented. An overall country score is also calculated by averaging these five component scores.

Illustrative Country Findings: The Case of Sierra Leone (2004)

Let's look at Sierra Leone as an example (as of 2004 when the data were collected). If conducted today, many of the questions would probably yield different answers because of changes in the situation.

1. Legal Environment Score = 1.87

Few key anti-corruption laws are in place. The criminal code does not explicitly define corruption as illegal. Civil service recruitment laws do not exist. In practice hiring decisions are rarely made on merit, and senior-level appointments are typically given to political supporters and friends of the top leaders rather than qualified persons. Public access to information also remains insufficient, and citizens are frequently unable to obtain public records, as freedom of information and sunshine laws are not in place. Asset disclosure requirements, codes of conduct, and whistleblower protection are all absent.

2. Enforcement and Prosecution Score = *2.41*

While some positive signs exist that the government is making attempts to enforce anti-corruption laws and prosecute offenders, key institutions appear to be weak or absent. On the positive side, the government has carried out corruption-related investigations in the last year, and some public officials have been sanctioned. Cases have also been brought before the judiciary in the last year, and some convictions have resulted. However, the judiciary lacks sufficient independence to issue verdicts against the ruling party. Money laundering and asset recovery units are absent.

3. Government Oversight Institutions Score = *2.86*

The results in this area are mixed. The government does have a national strategy to combat corruption, but has taken limited action to implement it. Further, the government has not put in place mechanisms to monitor the implementation of its anti-corruption strategy nor does it report regularly on progress. These indicators suggest that the government's ownership of and commitment to substantive reforms may be weak.

On the positive side, the government has created an anti-corruption agency that appears to have significant capacity and independence. However, investigations typically do not lead to prosecution. A major deficiency in the distribution of powers was noted regarding the role of the parliament, which is not engaged in efforts to combat corruption. The parliament is not able to counterbalance the executive office, and in practice, the parliament has not initiated any investigations into corrupt practices within the last year.

Lastly, regarding the delivery of public services (health, education, etc.), mechanisms to monitor these agencies and functions are in place, but citizens have no recourse in cases where service delivery fails.

4. Budget and Public Expenditure Score = *2.27*

Sierra Leone has not put in place appropriate rules and regulations for public financial management, parliamentary oversight of expenditures, and government procurement. There is no integrated financial management system. Audits are rarely conducted and reports are generally not made available for public scrutiny. The capacity of the supreme audit institution is minimal. Parliamentary oversight of the budget was noted as generally insufficient. On procurement, appropriate laws are in place requiring that the government collect multiple bids for major procurements. However, in practice, procurements are rarely made in accordance with required procedures, and decisions are generally not made public.

5. Civil Society, Media and Business Score = *3.11*

The one bright spot for Sierra Leone is in the area of civil society and media. Civil society groups that claim anticorruption as part of their mandate do exist, and these organizations have had some impact on government policy. The media appears to be generally independent from the state, and the media frequently reports on corruption. In some cases, media reporting has led to government investigations. Corruption surveys and public awareness campaigns have been carried out, and both have had some impact in elevating the issue of corruption in national debates.

Region-wide Findings across 16 African countries

1. It is clear that many "stroke of the pen" reforms have been accomplished in most countries, but more substantive reforms lag. For example, many countries have passed laws making corruption illegal, but enforcement of these laws remains weak. Commissions, oversight agencies, and new institutions have also been created, but their independence and capacity remain limited.

2. Distribution of power between the main branches of government remains problematic for maintaining true accountability. Parliaments and judiciaries generally have limited power to hold the executive office accountable, sanction corrupt practices or play an oversight function.

3. The capacity of agencies, commissions and institutions with a mandated role to combat corruption is generally insufficient.

4. Civil society is actively engaged in the effort to reduce corruption. The vast majority of countries reported the presence of civil society organizations that have adopted corruption as part of their mission, and in a significant number of countries, civil society organizations have succeeded in impacting government policy.

5. The media is actively engaged in investigating and reporting on corruption. In most countries, the media is reasonably free from government control and frequently reports on cases of corruption. In several countries, media reporting has led directly to government investigations of corruption.

6. Access to budget and expenditure data is limited in most countries. Many reported the existence of integrated financial management systems, but budgets, financial data and audit reports are often not made available to oversight agencies or the public.

7. The political will and commitment of government authorities for reform appears to be inadequate in many places. While most countries have developed national strategies to combat corruption, few have taken significant actions to implement these strategies. Fewer have put in place monitoring mechanisms to measure progress or procedures for routinely reporting on progress. These findings suggest that many governments lack a deep commitment to the substantive reforms necessary to curb corruption.

Recommendations about the Checklist Assessment Tool

Our pilot test suggests that the Checklist Assessment tool can serve as a very useful and practical rapid assessment mechanism for field Missions. It can help them develop a comprehensive outlook on country anticorruption programs – what exists, what works, what is missing, and what needs strengthening. Based on this assessment, the weakest links and missing elements will become very apparent and can be developed into programmatic options for future USAID support. In particular, the pilot test yielded the following conclusions about the checklist technique:

1. The Checklist Assessment tool provides a good and detailed overview of a country's anticorruption progress.

2. The questions asked by the checklist can typically be answered by knowledgeable USG staff in the field. But the checklist is best completed by a combined team of specialists in a field Mission or embassy plus host country experts.

3. The conclusions drawn from the checklist lend themselves readily to programmatic options that USAID, other donors and the host country can incorporate in future programming. For example, based on the checklist's findings, recommended programs might incentivize political will for reforms, build more functional checks and balances, strengthen the capacity of institutions, engage civil society, the media or the private sector, generate open budget processes, support greater access to information, encourage asset recovery laws, and support civil service reform, for example.

To access the checklist tool, contact MSI or click here.

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