What to Avoid and What We Don't Know about Fighting Corruption

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An earlier technical note synthesized what we've learned about "what works" in fighting corruption based on several rigorous meta-analysis studies. Equally important for anticorruption programmers is to know "what to avoid" and where we just don't know enough. Here's what those studies tell us.

Over the past few years, there have been several efforts to integrate what we really know about the effectiveness of anticorruption programs – what works and what doesn't work. USAID and DFID have sponsored the most rigorous of these studies that have analyzed hundreds of anticorruption initiatives worldwide. [1] An earlier technical note in this series focused on the positive – programs that have been found to be effective in reducing corruption. In this note, based on the same studies, we highlight what programs to avoid and where we just don't have enough information to know if certain types of programs are effective.

What to Avoid

Anticorruption programmers are cautioned to avoid certain types of initiatives because they have been tried but failed to reduce corruption across a significant number of past projects.

- Avoid law enforcement programming aimed at corruption in countries with a repressive political environment (a)

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1   Four meta-analysis studies serve as the basis for our assessment. Each finding in this technical note is associated with one of the studies and denoted by a letter (a-d):
   a.   USAID (2015) Practitioner's Guide for Anticorruption Programming. Washington, DC: USAID (authored by MSI)
   b.   DFID (2015) Why corruption matters: understanding causes, effects and how to address them: Evidence Paper on Corruption (January), London: DFID
   c.   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)
   d.   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).

- Refrain from setting explicit anticorruption goals in countries with minimal or questionable political will or with tenuous stability (a)

- Donors should avoid the appearance of imposing anticorruption interventions on countries, and instead, approach it as a collaborative effort that would boost commitment and ensure local ownership (a)

- Refrain from setting unrealistic project timeframes that could leave reforms incomplete and breed public skepticism (a)

- Avoid accountability and oversight interventions if enforcement and sanctions will likely not be faithfully administered (a)

- Refrain from mobilizing citizens to report their corruption complaints if the justice system or other complaint handling systems have few ways of actually addressing grievances and following up on such cases (a)

- Donors should refrain promoting explicit anticorruption reforms in countries where state power is fully controlled by political and economic elite or their personal favorites (state capture regimes) (a)

- Avoid supporting anticorruption rhetoric if there is likely to be no rigorous anticorruption action (a)

- Avoid supporting anticorruption institutions that are not viable (a)

- Avoid creating donor-driven country anticorruption strategies (a)

- Avoid design-reality gaps, where there is a mismatch between project expectations and the realities of the political context (a)

- Support for anticorruption agencies, anticorruption strategies, and civil service reform tend to be ineffective in reducing corruption in situations where there is excessive political influence, uneven financial support and institutional weakness (b, d)

- Community monitoring, oversight and social audits appear to be unsuccessful in reducing corruption when implemented independently of other initiatives (c)

- Donor imposition of anticorruption conditionalities in government-to-government grants are ineffective (d)

Inconclusive Results

- Past programs that reform the police, build financial intelligence units, support parliaments or the private sector or develop the anticorruption legal framework are inconclusive in terms of their impacts on corruption (d)

- There are no conclusive findings across many projects that demonstrate the effectiveness of CSO and community monitoring and social audits in reducing corruption (b, d)

- Support for revenue and customs reforms, transparency and access to information activities, and promotion and enforcement of international agreements (like the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) or the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)) do not offer conclusive findings in terms of their impact on reducing corruption (b)

- Past projects that promote government monitoring and auditing of government activities via supreme audit institutions or internal audits do not provide conclusive findings about their effectiveness in reducing corruption (c, d)

- Decentralization programs show inconclusive impacts on reducing corruption. It appears to depend on the community's capacity to allocate funds, maintain regulations and lead projects (b, c, d)

What Have We Learned?

- Lots of popular initiatives have been found to be either ineffective or without an evidence base to demonstrate that they work. Programmers should avoid these activities or, at a minimum, should make sure that rigorous systems are established to monitor their performance and practice adaptive management should that be appropriate.

- Many initiatives may function well but only under certain circumstances. Political economy analyses (PEA) should be conducted initially and on a regular basis after a project is implemented to ensure that there is a good match between the activity and the country context, stakeholder capacity and existing political will.

- The most effective anticorruption programs need to be multidimensional. That is, they don't depend on only one activity (which might not live up to expectations), but involve multiple coordinated activities that work simultaneously or in a phased approach. They need to incorporate supply- and demand-side activities, involve many stakeholders, and ensure that corruption vulnerabilities across many sectors are tackled.

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