Communication in anti-corruption work: Articulating messages to structure a communication plan
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Introduction

It is clear that anti-corruption work is having a ‘moment’. There is quite a lot to show for the last decade and a half: a changed global discourse on corruption; significant advances in corruption measurement and indicators; international forums for discussion and collaboration; and, of course, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). Development assistance has played a vital role in helping to bring about these changes. However, on the ground, there is less to show for this work than we might hope: there is little direct evidence of return on investment, at both the project and country levels; safe-guarding of aid funds is problematic, especially given the difficult environments in which development agencies work; globally, corruption seems to be getting worse overall, rather than better; the international drivers of corruption have been getting more and more complex; and there is a serious lack of policy coherence, both within donor governments and between development agencies.

Political, social and economic changes have increased the attention being paid right now to the impact of corruption on aid. The global economic crisis not only highlights the price paid for corruption and bad governance, but subsequent austerity programmes in many donor countries put pressure on governments to justify their public’s money being spent on development assistance. We have seen a shift to the (centre) right in politics over the last few years and an increased tension between ministers and development agencies as a result. This has led to a new ‘results agenda’, demanding more in terms of evidence of value for money. Agencies have begun working more in post-conflict environments, which pose significant challenges for the delivery of development assistance. Finally, new donors have risen, often with very different approaches to corruption and anti-corruption than traditional OECD-DAC donors.

As a result of this ‘moment’, anti-corruption development assistance will need to change, but it is not always clear how or in which way.

This communications note is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of all of these different challenges nor a step-by-step plan on how each Anti-Corruption Task Team (ACTT) member agency should structure its communication strategy. It is instead a step in articulating more effective messages for use at the political level to explain the resources spent on anti-corruption work to parliaments and taxpayers in OECD-DAC countries. It is intended to provide OECD-DAC ACTT members with a foundation on which to plan their own communications strategies reaching other development agency staff, ministries and the public.

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This research has been guided by the following questions:

1. What is corruption and why is it important in development cooperation? What is the impact of corruption on development?
2. What do we know about the public in DAC countries’ perceptions about corruption in development aid? Have these changed over time? How do these compare with public perceptions of corruption elsewhere?
3. How can we measure corruption? What do current measures tell us? How are these measures being used to shape policy and make decisions on aid allocations, aid instruments, etc.?
4. What are donors currently doing in the fight against corruption (past and current trends, tools and approaches)? In particular, what are the complexities in protecting aid funds with the increased trend in using developing countries’ own systems for the management, safeguards and reporting on the use of funds (through budget support, sector wide approaches, working in conflict settings, etc.)?
5. What has worked? What has not worked?

Usually, these are the questions around which any communication strategy, targeting different audiences in an OECD country, would have to articulate itself. This document presents key points to consider when preparing a communication plan on corruption and follows these questions in sequence. Finally, this document is the result of a review of relevant literature (evidence papers, evaluations, policy strategy documents, academic articles etc.), as well as a number of interviews with key development agency staff, civil society partners and academics, and reflections on my own research over the past fifteen years into donor anti-corruption programmes.
1. The impact of corruption on development

There is no doubt that corruption is one of the most difficult challenges that development agencies face, if not the most difficult. At the country level, losses due to corruption can be catastrophic for a country’s ability (and, perhaps, willingness) to deliver public goods. Estimates are contested and show a mixed picture: in some countries - including a diverse group such as Bangladesh, Haiti and Liberia - the estimated cost of corruption is at least half of the actual GDP per capita. In other countries - such as Iraq, Kenya and Egypt - this is substantially less as a percentage, but still significant, with a knock-on effect on trust in government and in society.4

The effects of corruption on development are manifold: the weakening of human rights and democracy; undermining the rule of law and state legitimacy; increasing the likelihood of conflict; and ensuring that ‘a world without poverty’, as the World Bank’s mission declares, remains a dream.

School children in India poisoned by corruption

The Indian government’s midday meals scheme is the largest free school meals programme in the world, delivering cooked meals to more than 120 million children in over one million schools across the country. Starting in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, in the 1920s, it was institutionalized across the country in the 1980s.5

It has been more successful in some states than others, and the key to its success or failure seems to be due to governance problems and corruption. There was no worse failure, though, than the deaths of more than twenty primary school children from between the ages of five and twelve in Bihar in 2013. A school’s cook used cooking oil stored in barrels contaminated with monocrotophus, an insecticide related to sarin gas, to cook the children’s meal, despite complaining to the headmistress that the oil smelled strange.

Tragically, two of the cook’s own children were among the dead6. The headmistress had purchased the cooking oil from her own husband’s grocery store; they fled soon after the incident but were captured by the police and have been charged with murder, and are now awaiting trial. The children suffered from severe stomach pains, vomiting and diarrhea before they died, and many are buried near the school as a reminder of the corruption that was responsible.

Development agencies are involved in anti-corruption on two fronts. The first is in supporting partner countries to fight corruption themselves. The second is in protecting aid funds from corruption and getting the most value for money, both for the poor in the countries in which they operate and for their own taxpayers.

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Corruption affects every aspect of work in which development agencies are involved; in this sense it can be said to be truly ‘mainstreamed’. It also remains by far one of the most complex issues to deal with because it is not something that can be dealt with by aid alone. Corruption is technical, managerial, cultural, social, economic and especially - as we are increasingly learning - political. In this, development agencies may have an important role to play but theirs is certainly not the only role. For corruption to be seriously addressed there needs to be greater policy coherence within and between donor governments.

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**Corruption and conflict: do no harm**

The literature on the relationship between corruption and conflict is often contradictory; while corruption may often be a driver of conflict, there is evidence to suggest that, in certain circumstances, it may also have conflict-mitigating properties. Post-conflict reconstruction efforts can inadvertently present new opportunities for corrupt practices, leaving donor attempts to fight corruption in the aftermath of violence in tatters.

The challenge for reconstruction is not just to figure out what to do about corruption, when, in what order and in a way that ‘does no harm’. It is also to ensure that post-conflict reconstruction efforts themselves do not have the perverse effect of contributing to corruption. These efforts involve substantial inflows of finance and personnel, both of which present new opportunities for corrupt practices. Iraq and Afghanistan are sad examples of this and illustrate that in post-conflict situations, the sources of corruption are not solely domestic. International interventions in both countries, backed by large amounts of economic assistance designed to support reconstruction, have failed to tackle the issue of corruption successfully and in many ways the actions of Western governments have served to undermine such attempts.

An article in Vanity Fair in 2007 reported that the US Federal Reserve shipped USD 12 billion in cash on pallets to Iraq between 2003 and 2004; at least USD 9 billion of this has gone missing. This is the equivalent of Zimbabwe’s GDP in 2013 or approximately one-third of the US’s entire aid budget for 2012, vanishing in bricks of USD 100 bills. In both the Iraq and Afghanistan cases, Western intervention contributed significantly to corruption in post-conflict reconstruction, exacerbating local tensions and prolonging conflict long after victory was officially declared. The main problem does not seem to be the one debated within academic and policy circles – at what point in the reconstruction process should donors push an anti-corruption agenda – but rather governments (not to be confused with ‘donors’) not greatly exacerbating an existing problem.

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KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN STRUCTURING A COMMUNICATION PLAN:

- Corruption has a devastating effect on development, and the human cost of corruption is very difficult to quantify. It undermines the social contract between the state and citizens, can lead to conflict and can even kill the innocent.

- Unfortunately, corruption is highly complex: it is multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary, as well as highly secretive. This makes it very difficult to deal with through discrete projects and programmes.

- A lack of policy coherence between development agencies and between agencies and their governments makes this worse.
2. Public attitudes towards corruption in development assistance

It is easy to make assumptions that public attitudes towards development assistance are impacted by perceptions of corruption. While we have some evidence that suggests a link in public perceptions between corruption and aid, we do not have strong evidence linking correlation and causality.

A confidential study on one Scandinavian public’s attitudes to development assistance shows that there has been a slight increase in recent years in the percentage of respondents who ‘strongly agree/agree that the majority of development aid falls into the wrong hands’ – from 49% in 2004 to 62% in 2008. But this has had no effect on the percentage that ‘strongly agree/agree that development assistance helps and contributes to development’ – 52% in 2004 and 52% in 2008. This suggests that support for aid has remained constant despite an increase in those that feel aid ‘falls into the wrong hands’.

A study for the UK Department for International Development DFID suggests that corruption plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of aid. In 2011, 54% of respondents said that corrupt leaders/governments are the main cause of poverty in poor countries; 55% strongly agree/tend to agree that ‘most financial aid to poor countries is wasted’; and 55% strongly agree/tend to agree that ‘the corruption in poor country governments makes it pointless donating money to reduce poverty’. However, 69% of respondents said that the ‘government is doing the right amount/should do more/should do a lot more’ to reduce poverty in poor countries. Leaving aside some methodological concerns with these studies, in both countries support for aid seems to remain, despite widespread concern about corruption/waste, and there is demand for positive stories of the impact that aid has made.

Much of the research undertaken suggests that we need to segment the public into ‘aid enthusiasts’ and ‘aid sceptics’ (clearly with others fitting somewhere between the two). Aid sceptics are not likely to respond to positive stories; they are sceptics not simply because of perceptions of corruption and waste. For aid enthusiasts, it appears that their strong moral support for aid far outweighs concerns they have about corruption and waste. Indeed, some of the respondents that were cited in a 2012 study by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) explained that they would never stop supporting aid/charity because of concerns over corruption/waste because they felt that disengagement was not a moral option for them. A team at the Quality of Government Institute, University of Gothenburg, used Eurobarometer data to conclude that, ‘Public reactions to corruption in aid substantially depend on fundamental beliefs about the role of corruption in development assistance’.

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8 Waste is obviously not the same thing as corruption, and it would be good for future studies to better disentangle these.
foreign aid’, with moral arguments being more compelling than either pragmatic or strategic ones.12

We do not yet have answers to some pretty important questions regarding public attitudes:

- Is there a tipping point where scandals regarding corruption and/or waste will begin to negatively affect aid enthusiasts?
- Are there ways in which we can ‘frame’ positive stories that will help shift sceptics’ negative perceptions?
- Can we frame messages in a way that appeal to all segments of the public, or do we need to tailor messages for particular segments?
- Should this be done by the ‘donor community’ as a global effort or does it need to be performed at the country level?

This issue of ‘framing’ poses a challenge. A 2009 DFID study used a ‘message testing’ exercise where participants were told a positive anti-corruption story in order to test their reaction.13 The story was about how DFID had successfully ensured that money to support the purchase of textbooks in Kenya had actually delivered the textbooks, rather than disappearing into the teachers’ pockets. Instead of reassuring participants, this story made the targeted participants very anxious. To them, corruption was something that is done by politicians, not by civil servants or service providers. DFID’s exercise suddenly brought to their attention that corruption can reach other layers of the civil service structure that they had not previously envisaged.

A famous study on framing by George Lakoff tells us ‘don’t think of the elephant’:14 as soon as you mention the elephant - in this case, corruption - the public will not be able to stop thinking about it. The implication of this is that development agencies and their ministers should avoid talking about corruption, for fear of increasing public anxiety regarding aid. Current research being undertaken by the author with David Hudson, Jennifer van Heerde-Hudson and Caryn Peiffer suggests that it is a somewhat more complicated picture.15 This research, drawing on large-N survey data that includes embedded experiments testing out several different corruption and anti-corruption messages suggests that the gap between aid sceptics and aid supporters is even wider than previous research suggests, even before corruption is brought into the equation. Faced with messages about specific corruption scandals – both grand and petty – support for development assistance drops significantly for sceptics but only marginally for supporters. However, in both groups, if shown messages about anti-corruption – i.e., what the development agency is trying to do to improve matters – there is no significant difference in support compared to the ‘no corruption’ message group; crucially this holds for both supporters and sceptics. This does not turn sceptics into supporters, but it does stop their dislike of aid from getting worse.

15 This research will be published by the Developmental Leadership Program (www.dlprog.org) in 2015 (see box below for more detail).
Though the research is ongoing and we are in the process of analyzing all of the data, some preliminary findings are suggested:

- Talking about corruption in aid does reduce support from both sceptics and supporters. However, talking about anti-corruption brings support - such as it is - back. This suggests that any anti-corruption messages should be reactive, not proactive. In other words, if there is a scandal, development agencies need to be seen to address this.
- The gulf between aid sceptics and supporters is massive. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to bring aid sceptics closer to supporters, regardless of messaging. We have no evidence that corruption is a driver of these attitudes or if it is the justification for pre-existing attitudes. These can include underlying values, including prejudice, or whether or not respondents support welfare spending more generally. The next round of tests in the author’s current research is designed to try to address this issue.
- A lack of understanding about aid, poverty, developing countries and corruption seems to be a significant problem. People want to see progress but instead see only problems.

Corruption and aid: what the public thinks
By David Hudson and Jennifer van Heerde-Hudson

Recent survey work in France, Germany, the US and UK reveals that the public agree with the statement that a lot of aid ends up in the pockets of corrupt politicians in the developing world. In Britain 74% agree with the statement, 69% in the US, 67% in Germany, and 64% in France. This is not a new finding; historical data from the UK’s now discontinued Public Attitudes Towards Aid annual survey suggested that the public thought that overseas corruption was a big problem. However, the recent survey data suggests that attitudes to corruption are actually hardening, at least in the UK, where questions about corruption have been asked since 2008. For example, when presented with the statement ‘corruption makes it pointless donating money’ the percentage of people who agree has gone up steadily each year, from 48% in 2008 to 67% in 2014.

When asked to estimate how much aid is lost to corruption the public often simply doesn’t know. Average estimates range from 53% in Britain and Germany to 57% in France and 60% in the US. But, more importantly, the public’s estimates are ‘all over the place’, i.e. they are almost equally likely to suggest any number between 0-100%, inclusive! This suggests that there is no compelling or commonly accepted public narrative about how much aid is lost to corruption.

In contrast, when people were asked how much aid they could tolerate being lost to corruption the average amount was 11% for Britain, 15% in Germany, 16% in France, and 18% in the US. This suggests that there is a small amount of space for donors and NGOs to work with in communicating potential risks and losses without challenging public expectations.

To see which communication frames might work, we tested a series of messages that variously justified giving aid where corruption exists. Notably, rational cost-

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16 For additional information contact David Hudson (d.hudson@ucl.ac.uk) or Jennifer van Heerde-Hudson (jennifer.hudson@ucl.ac.uk).
benefit type messages (such as “aid promotes growth despite corruption” or “the benefits outweigh the losses”) performed badly. The moral case worked well with aid supporters but, importantly, failed to resonate with aid sceptics. The best performing messages were either statements of ‘zero tolerance’ (e.g. “every penny should reach the intended recipients”) or ones that emphasised dealing with corruption in some way (e.g. “aid should be used to fight corruption” or “donors should prioritise countries that are doing more to fight corruption”). This suggests that the key ingredient is to communicate that corruption is being actively addressed.

Finally, we ran a survey experiment (N=1804) with the UK public to see whether it was possible to talk about anti-corruption without triggering thoughts of corruption – the ‘don’t think of an elephant’ effect referenced above. To test the effect we randomly allocated people to four different statements: (i) a control group that received a message about poverty in Kenya with no mention of corruption, (ii) information about the prevalence of bribery in Kenya, (iii) a story about grand corruption, or (iv) a statement about DFID’s anti-corruption efforts in Kenya. Respondents were then asked whether they thought we should stop giving aid to Kenya. Crucially, there was no statistically significant difference between the control group and the treatment group that received the DFID anti-corruption statement. Meanwhile, the two other groups that received information about bribery or grand corruption were significantly more likely to agree that we should stop aid to Kenya. This suggests that public opposition to aid is significantly increased when they hear about corruption, but the public can be won back with clear communications about anti-corruption efforts.
KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN STRUCTURING A COMMUNICATION PLAN:

- There is little systematic evidence that explains the impact that perceptions of corruption have on support (or lack of support) for aid. We do not know enough about how messages to the public on corruption and aid - even positive ones - are taken on board. We need to do further research on this.

- Not all development agencies have conducted research on public perceptions or are aware of national-level studies. Without more information, it is impossible to say this with any degree of certainty, but it would seem that although most countries have ‘aid enthusiasts’ and ‘aid sceptics’, messages will need to be developed for each country’s own political, social and economic context. One message from the ‘donor community’ is unlikely to resonate with every country in the same way that tailored messages might.
3. Measuring corruption for better decision-making

There have been considerable advances in measuring corruption over the past decade, moving us well beyond the Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). However, this explosion in indicators is barely known outside of governance circles. This includes staff within development agencies (i.e., those with sector specialisms), as well as ministers and embassy staff. What we tend to find, again and again, is that non-governance/corruption specialists return to the CPI as a corruption measurement tool.\(^{17}\)

Measuring corruption is difficult and imprecise and requires, in most cases, specialist knowledge in order to even determine which tool might be the most appropriate to use in a particular situation. TI’s GATEway project (http://gateway.transparency.org) hopes to simplify this, but with well over 500 indicators to choose from, and 14 different topic guides, it is very unlikely that this source will be used by non-governance specialists – very useful for those who need to draw on indicator sources fairly regularly, but difficult for a ministerial aide without specialist knowledge to jump into in order to find the right tool quickly. The beauty of the CPI is that it is simple in its presentation, easy to find, well known outside corruption circles and elicits a response. The fact that it is wholly inappropriate for almost all purposes beyond advocacy is immaterial; it is very unlikely to find ministers or ambassadors using an indicator that requires a more sophisticated understanding of corruption measurement tools.

Corruption actually plays a very small role, if any, in most policy/investment decisions, which tend instead to be made through economic modeling, including other sorts of developmental issues (e.g., numbers in poverty, need, etc.). There is little sense that a country’s corruption profile plays a significant role in how much aid goes to a particular country. Instead, there are different agendas behind aid allocations, such as comparative advantage, history of country engagement, economic interest and so on. This is possibly a ‘180-degree turn’ on what most members of the public think, who may assume that governance and corruption are important issues in making allocation decisions.\(^ {18}\)

The big question then is whether or not corruption should play a bigger role in decision-making. Do the people that are involved in specific decision-making understand corruption indicators and their limitations? Do we have robust enough measurements to make big decisions? Will other issues - such as levels of poverty, security, economic self-interest, etc. - continue to be the biggest factors in decision-making? How many countries would development agencies actually be able to work in if corruption was made a bigger part of the decision-making process?


\(^ {18}\) The World Bank is, in fact, the only development agency that provides public evidence that investment decisions are made using corruption indicators, through the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) Framework. This includes an indicator on ‘Transparency, Accountability and Corruption in the Public Sector’. Having said this, whether it is intentional or not, corruption is only part of one indicator and is the last indicator in the list. See http://www.worldbank.org/ida/IRAI2011/webFAQ11.pdf, p. 3.
KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN STRUCTURING A COMMUNICATION PLAN:

- Although there has been tremendous progress in corruption indicators in the last decade, knowledge of these rarely extends beyond the governance community.

- It is unlikely that non-governance specialists will ever truly understand the huge array of corruption indicators available to them or, indeed, how problematic many of these indicators are. One way forward may be to require governance advisors to produce a one-page sheet on corruption measurement/trends within a particular country, updated once or twice a year, which can be handed to ministers/ambassadors/country staff as a brief as required. This could help to stop the over-reliance on the CPI or other figures or tools non-suitable to be used for more than advocacy.

- Corruption seems to be a very small part, if any, of the decision-making process on aid allocations in most development agencies, and the use of corruption indicators in the process is not clear. This is not because of lack of interest or lack of indicators (though there are important questions about validity and appropriateness) but because other reasons take precedence.
4. The role of development agencies in fighting corruption

There has been a significant shift recently in experts and practitioners’ thinking on anti-corruption work. Three generations of anti-corruption in development have succeeded and even overlapped each other.19

1st generation: the principal-agent problem (e.g., Corruption = Monopoly + Discretion - Accountability)

2nd generation: the ‘demand side’, transparency and accountability (e.g., civil society, Freedom of Information)

3rd generation: tackling the ‘political logic’ of corruption.

Experts and practitioners know more about what does not work than we have ever known: it is widely acknowledged that the technical solutions advocated in the first generation have been disappointing, with political will flagged as a persistent barrier to success. It is also known that demand is difficult to generate externally, due in part - again - to problems with political will. It is understood that corruption is complex and that processes and approaches that reflect this complexity are needed. Just as necessary are better political economy analysis, leading to more nuanced and more context focused approaches. Finally, experts and practitioners are beginning to understand that anti-corruption work faces several collective action problems, going beyond a naïve understanding of corruption as a relatively simple problem of individual ethics.

Work on collective action is in its infancy, and the implications for practice have not yet been explored.20 There has been an explosion in political economy analysis tools, but these have not often lived up to the hype. Development actors know they are supposed to be working with political systems as they exist, rather than trying to impose Western ideals on these, which is ineffective.21 But what if these systems are predatory, violent and deeply corrupt? The role for development agencies in this ‘3rd generation’ will be smaller than in the past, and will most likely be more focused on international efforts – for example UNCAC, revenue transparency, asset recovery, illicit financial flows and working with partners to tackle the ‘international drivers of corruption’ - than on projects and programming.

If anti-corruption work is having this ‘moment’, development assistance actors are also certainly having a moment in terms of safe-guarding aid funds. Several ministers have taken a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to protecting aid funds, including (re)introducing ring-fencing, though this may mean different things to different agencies. In some, it is understood as

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determination to thoroughly investigate any suspicion of corruption involving agency funds, while still being willing to enter into higher risk environments, while in other agencies ‘zero tolerance’ means not being willing to even enter a country where risk is too high. In all agencies, there is likely to be a spectrum of options between these two, often depending upon context. Regardless of appetite for risk, there is growing recognition of the need to develop more concrete proposals on how to manage these risks.

Development agencies are developing or updating their anti-fraud policies with prior due diligence for third parties receiving aid; due diligence on individuals signing aid agreements; cash on delivery instruments; and performance for results (P4R) instruments. There has also been a tremendous shift towards more openness in data on aid, with several donors receiving a ‘very good’ rating in Publish What You Fund’s 2014 Aid Transparency Index. Although, it must be said, there is still a great deal of work to be done here – with 53 out of 68 donors scoring fair, poor and very poor.

Despite this, there is still a pull-back from budget support, in particular, which is perceived by some to be associated with higher risk than other aid instruments. There are good reasons, though, to challenge this. If governance is essential to development, security and economic growth, countries need to be able to build up their own systems and institutions. Decades of research has shown that having aid operating in parallel with government systems does not help build these systems, and it actually undermines the very systems good governance needs. In this sense, pulling back from commitments on ownership and harmonisation is likely to mean short-term gain for long-term pain.

In its contribution to the European Commission’s consultation on the future of EU budget support, TI argues that ‘the risk of corruption should never be used as a condition to prevent the allocation of budget support’. Instead of introducing more conditionality, TI argues that ‘evidence of progress on commitments’ on anti-corruption should be the condition on which budget support is provided. As long as progress on these commitments continues, budget support is preferred to project or other aid instruments. In other words, before entering into budget support agreements, there should be a reasonable degree of confidence that the government is committed to reform, and donors should stick by these reformers.

Instead of trying to ‘ring-fence’ aid, development agencies need a better ‘Plan B’ than they currently have. It might seem like a bit of a caricature but at times they can appear to have only two tools in their box when it comes to responding to corruption scandals involving aid: a) pretending it has not happened in the hopes that it will go away, and b) shutting down a country’s entire aid programme. Of course, this is an exaggeration, but it is not that far off from the truth. It should be fairly straight-forward to have a menu of options that ranges from general budget support to sector budget support to sector wide approaches to projects to capacity building to shut-down, that are open and transparent, and easy to articulate to the

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public. The World Bank does this already to a certain degree; although not perfect nor risk-free, it is a sensible way forward.

Another way forward may be to have an arbitration clause, where it is agreed in advance with aid recipients how to deal with corruption. A corruption episode will trigger this clause but the relationship carries on around it. This could allow development agencies to be confident that corruption will be dealt with without just pulling out of a sector or a country overall. Getting incentives right is key, but linked to this is having a better, more graduated approach to what action is taken when corruption does occur.

There are two final challenges, both of which are political. The first is the lack of collective action among donors in country, which undermines attempts by some donors to take a strong stance on corruption. Donor coordination in countries continues to bedevil us. Recent research on donor-funded anti-corruption programming in Afghanistan demonstrates this very clearly.25

The second is the tension between urgency on pipeline (with messages from Finance/the Treasury to staff about not hitting their spend targets) versus ‘not having a road crash in your country either’. Ultimately, ministers/heads of agencies will come down on the side of avoiding the road crash; hence, the talk about ring-fencing aid. It is not clear whether this tension is real or perceived; would a staff member, country office or agency actually suffer as a result of acting on evidence of corruption, as long as they were acting appropriately? If pipelines are sluggish because staff are doing due diligence, would they be told to spend without the right safeguards in place? This battle is a political question, and needs urgent clarification from governments of donor countries. To take anti-corruption seriously, it should be made absolutely clear that no individual, country office or development agency will suffer as a result of acting on evidence of corruption, even if it means that they (significantly) under-spend; that there will be no future budget allocation consequences for not meeting spend targets, if the reason for doing so is protecting aid funds.

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KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN STRUCTURING A COMMUNICATION PLAN:

• Learning from others on how to safeguarding aid is an important step forward. The OECD-DCD is working on gathering lessons on how different actors deal with corruption risks when operating in developing countries. The collection of experiences from development agencies, but also those of private sector actors, can help bilateral development agencies better shape their own internal safeguarding systems.

• Politicians need to be made aware of a nuanced narrative about how development assistance does come with risks, and that it is better to be honest about these risks, rather than trying to ring-fence aid with layers of safeguards.

• It is important to recognise that this is not just an issue at the political level, but that within development agencies there are often two camps: the nuanced camp ('be honest about risk') and the 'zero-tolerance' camp ('set up ring-fences'). A communication strategy needs to clearly identify its target audience and obtain knowledge on which camp they sit on.

• The big question on staff incentives to deal effectively with corruption is political: Treasury versus parliament, spend versus avoid the road crash. More and better due diligence will very likely slow down the pipeline. Governments need to be able to deal with this. After all, if they cannot deal with their own 'political logic', how can they begin to deal with the political logic in partner countries?
5. What has worked? What hasn’t worked?

A key challenge for anti-corruption work has to do with evidence, or rather the lack of a strong evidence base on what works and what does not. There is actually very little evidence of what works, or what does not work, on anti-corruption, either in the evaluation or academic literature. It is very difficult for external researchers to get copies of evaluations, so it is not possible to judge success or failure other than by self-declaration or selective release. None of this builds confidence in this work.26

A recent U4/DFID paper that identified evidence gaps in anti-corruption work/research provides some pretty stark reading. The review found that ‘only in the case of PFM does the evidence clearly support that such measures reduce corruption’.27 In terms of public sector reforms (other than PFM), oversight institutions, civil society, budget support, donors’ own systems and multilateral agreements, the evidence is weak or fair at best. How much of this is down to failed interventions and how much is down to gaps or weaknesses in the evidence base itself (e.g., an overall lack of empirical research on anti-corruption work in fragile states), though, is unknown.

Having said this, the picture is possibly not as bleak as it seems. Looking at the last fifteen years from a ground/micro-level, it might look like not a lot has been achieved, but with a bird’s eye view, you would see several important changes. Within development agencies, a tremendous emphasis on training has brought much greater awareness and unwillingness to accept corruption as something that has just ‘always been there’. Development agencies have contributed to the ‘explosion’ of interest in corruption/anti-corruption; to anti-corruption legislation at the international level; to advocacy and awareness; and to changing the global discourse. This is no small achievement. If you look at partner countries, even if the experience has been overwhelmingly disappointing, we can still see change – revamping laws, updating national strategies etc. This might be a small change, but it is still likely to be important in the medium- to long-term.

26 A key challenge going forward is understanding how to better communicate failure – and learning from failure – when we have clear evidence that an intervention is not working. Given the current lack of understanding on the relationship between public attitudes towards aid and corruption, there is considerable risk that nuances within messages on failure may be misinterpreted or even ignored. As such, more research is needed to understand how best to communicate failure in a way that supports effective and active learning.

Everyone associates Brazil with football and the World Cup, but few outsiders expected to see Brazilians pouring out onto the street to protest the competition being hosted in their country in the summer of 2014. In over one hundred cities, over one million people – rallied by social media – came together to speak out against the high cost of soon-to-be superfluous stadiums, police brutality and other forms of corruption. Fans held signs high that said ‘FIFA go home’ and ‘The World Cup of Corruption’. Over USD 15 billion was spent on the Cup, but only 10% of what was promised for schools and healthcare seems to have been spent. Brazilians made it clear they had had enough and were not going to be placated. Even by football.

Even twenty years ago such protests would have been unthinkable, but Brazil has had decades now of anti-corruption reforms. Transparency International notes some of these: better anti-corruption and transparency legislation; increasing evidence of judicial independence, meaning the corrupt are no longer ‘guaranteed’ impunity; an increased number of investigations and arrests for corruption; an impressively free media; and an increasingly active civil society. Though there is still clearly much to be done, these are impressive achievements that are leading to transformational change.

Important, all of these reforms – and many others – are responsible for the changing landscape in Brazil. It would be impossible to trace this back to one single project, one single anti-corruption programme. Any results are likely to come out of a patchwork of reforms, some of which may take years to bear fruit, or may only erupt as the result of a particular scandal, an election, or another such ‘critical juncture’. This is why the results-based agenda is so problematic for fighting corruption and why a ‘bird’s eye view’ on anti-corruption is so important.

Anti-corruption practitioners and experts certainly need to have a better sense of where we have come from and for the time-lag issue; corruption has been with us for many millennia. It cannot be eradicated globally in the space of a few years thanks to aid. It seems unrealistic to think that we should expect it will be totally eradicated, ever. Even in countries that are perceived to have become less corrupt, whether over the past few decades or the past few centuries, corruption is still evident and manifests itself in different ways. What can be expected instead is that we are moving towards more and more disclosure of cases so that citizens understand that impunity is not the norm, and that those involved will be investigated and punished.

Research is beginning to suggest that indirect approaches to anti-corruption may be more successful than direct approaches. In his background paper to the 2011 World Development Report, Michael Johnston argues convincingly for ‘long-term, indirect strategies that look to build essential trust within society and to build the state’s capacity’, rather than discrete anti-corruption projects/programmes. My own research suggests that ‘being realistic, pursuing

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Nossa Copa é na Rua – ‘Our Cup is on the Streets’

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indirect strategies over the long term, and building integrity rather than fighting corruption’ is likely to prove more successful.29

Tackling corruption indirectly in Afghanistan30

The Performance Based Governors’ Fund (PBGF) provided each of the 34 provincial governor’s offices (PGOs) with USD 25,000 per month for operational and community outreach activities. The funds (from the US, UK and Belgian governments) were disbursed and monitored by a partner NGO, The Asia Foundation, through a member of staff based in every PGO.

The PBGF illustrates the value of an indirect approach. It increases the operational and community project funds available to provincial governors’ offices (PGOs) and provincial councils. Its minimal authorisation system provides considerable spending power, but this is combined with transparency and reporting requirements, frequent (published) evaluations including scores and rankings, and performance-related funding. Governors’ performance indicators encourage consultation with citizens and responsiveness to their concerns: the programme seeks to build state-society trust and a culture of accountability in public office – among political appointees (provincial governors) as well as elected officials (provincial councils). It aims to incentivise behaviour change over the long term. However, even during the PBGF’s pilot year, most of the provincial governors increased their evaluation.

Some of the lessons suggested by the PBGF:

- Make expectations realistic. The PBGF promotes gradual improvement through ‘learning by doing’.
- Recognise the value of reputational – and thus political – incentives. Given the prominence of corruption as a political issue in Afghanistan, many governors sought to improve their evaluation scores in order to portray themselves as good managers. Those who considered opting out were dissuaded from doing so by the risk of reputational damage.
- Build capacity in existing institutions. The PBGF works with existing institutions to improve their effectiveness. It seeks to facilitate a gradual shift towards more reliance on formal systems and less on informal networks.
- Experiment (carefully). The PBGF seeks to enable reform in new ways while using close monitoring to help guard against doing harm.
- Accept a level of risk in the context of supporting small steps towards overall improved governance.

At this stage, it is necessary to come back to the issue of measurement. It is not possible to say with any certainty whether anti-corruption projects or programmes have been successes or failures because the existing tools do not measure this. Typically there are no baselines on which to base evaluations. Evaluations are rarely made available and as such, are not able to feed into research. Without access to evaluations, it is not possible to learn from successes

and failures. It is also difficult to link particular interventions to specific outcomes, and any outcomes are themselves very difficult to measure.

Finally, there is great need to (better) convey the message that all of this work on anti-corruption has taken place at the same time as the rise in globalisation and the deregulation of global financial markets. It has never been this easy to be corrupt. While the reverse is true, that it has never been so difficult to escape scrutiny in even the most remote corners of the globe – from citizens, social media, and international NGOs, it is important not to forget globalisation’s ‘facilitation’ of corruption. This is something that OECD-DAC member states can do something about, and the only thing that prevents it is a lack of political will. When we speak of policy incoherence, this is probably the most challenging issue for development agencies’ anti-corruption programming, and it is almost entirely in the control of donor governments to change this.

KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN STRUCTURING A COMMUNICATION PLAN:

- There has been little documented success in anti-corruption projects/programmes over the last decade. However, it is not actually possible to judge success or failure because existing tools still do not offer any degree of certainty. We need to invest more in finding these tools.

- Evaluations need to be opened up for review and for research. Claims about success or failure cannot be made and there is no opportunity for learning and for sharing.

- Focus should be on the ‘bird’s eye view’ and on a narrative about how much has actually changed in a relatively short amount of time, while also demonstrating the need to be more realistic about time-frames. After all, what the ‘3rd generation’ tells us is that anti-corruption efforts are trying to do nothing less than change the entire political and social dynamic in many countries, and this is not going to happen in typical project cycles. It is certainly not going to happen as the result of aid alone.

- Although the evidence base is not yet there, indirect approaches to corruption are looking more promising than direct ones.

- Lack of policy coherence, particularly on illicit financial flows, makes development agencies’ work on anti-corruption very difficult and sends mixed messages about our commitment to fighting corruption.
Conclusion

The evidence on anti-corruption work seems to be pointing to the need for a more nuanced approach, both in terms of working with partner countries and in terms of protecting aid funds. More nuanced does not mean more accepting, although there is certainly a risk that the public might see it that way if messages are not clear or are contradictory. More nuanced means acknowledging that corruption is complex. Even though this acknowledgment might be bad for development and the political logic may be difficult to understand, development actors need to keep trying to do so.

Likewise, if donors are giving aid in very difficult governance environments, where it is impossible to protect every single cent of taxpayers’ aid, but where there might be other reasons for remaining that might be developmental, economic or political, the answer is not to have a simple message about ‘zero tolerance’, but rather to have a clear message that is transparent, open and accountable. Where policy coherence is a problem, even though corruption may be the biggest challenge, it is not the only one and it is not the only priority. In terms of protecting aid funds, there may be many other reasons why donors might want to engage in a particular country, and not being honest about communicating those is a problem.

The challenges for delivering aid to some of the worst governance environments in the world cannot be over-stated. To which standards are donors held when delivering aid in these environments – the same standards that public spending faces at home or a realistic standard based on the context? Can we learn from the private sector about ‘risks’ and is there a way to package this for the public? In these environments in particular, it may be best to focus on indirect measures that build accountability, integrity and support service delivery and only do direct anti-corruption projects/programming when there is a track record of internally-driven reform.

There is also the paradox of delivering aid in some of the worst governance environments in the world with an ever-diminishing number of staff. Development agencies are expected to deliver on results and protect aid funds in unbelievably difficult circumstances, often with fewer staff in country than one might find on the pitch in a football match. Something has to give. Donors do not just need stronger internal controls, although these of course would not go amiss. They also need a better menu of options for what to do when things go wrong. Staff need incentives and bureaucratic structures that are not contradictory. And, importantly, they need ‘safe spaces’ for staff to discuss corruption challenges with management and with their peers without fear of reprisal. Learning more about what works – and what does not – will not easily happen without this.