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The C Word: How should the aid business think and act about Corruption?
Duncan Green, July 1, 2015.

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The C Word: How should the aid business think and act about Corruption?

July 1, 2015

Duncan Green

Went to a seminar on corruption and development on Monday – notable in itself as corruption is something of a taboo topic in aid circles. Aid supporters often cite framing – George Lakoff’s ‘Don’t Think of an Elephant’ or Richard Nixon’s ‘I am not a crook’– as justification for avoiding the topic; even if you raise it to dismiss it, the connection between aid and corruption will be established in the public mind. Unfortunately ignoring it/leaving it to the Daily Mail hasn’t worked too well – David Hudson’s research (still unpublished, but previewed here) shows that the % of the UK public agreeing with the decidedly clunky (DFID-drafted) statement ‘corruption in poor country governments makes it pointless donating money to help reduce poverty’ has risen rapidly from 44% to 61% since 2008. He also found that talking to members of the public about how aid is trying to tackle corruption can undo the damage of raising the issue in the first place (and help immunise people against the barrage of press reports).

The seminar heard from David, and the findings of a DFID evidence review by Alina Rocha Menocal and Nils Taxell (among others). Some impressions:

The word itself doesn’t help. According to Nils Taxell, ‘The papers we looked at do not define what they mean by corruption – it’s a blanket term.’ Overall, the word feels externally imposed – I’m not at all sure people in developing countries would use the same term to describe embezzling a billion dollars that means a road is never built and an underpaid official asking for a sweetener. See this research from Papua New Guinea for how citizens themselves see the issue.

It’s amazing how little we know about almost anything in development. A 100 page review of the evidence finds confusion, contradiction and very little certainty about the effects of corruption, or what to do about it. We can’t even properly answer basic questions like ‘is country X more/less corrupt than it was 5 years ago?’ Is that the inevitable result of the complexity of political and social systems or the inbuilt bias of researchers to default to NMR (Needs more Research)? Probably both.
Indirect is best. In his book *Obliquity*, John Kay argues that many goals in life are best achieved by approaching them indirectly. This appears to apply here. It’s almost never the interventions directly targeted at corruption that work. Often the fight against it is characterized as the end, but the goal should be about promoting some aspect of development, with tackling corruption as simply one of the means to that end. In similar vein, combination effects matter. Delivering isolated interventions (e.g., on police reform, judiciary or setting up an anti-Corruption body), often fail. A huge effort at police reform, but no action on sorting out the judiciary simply means ‘you just bribe the judge instead’.

There’s only one thing worse than being ignored by donor politicians, and that’s not being ignored by them….. Corruption is top of ministers’ agendas, but like all politicians, they want simple clear messages they can sell to the public, not the ’50 shades of grey’ beloved of researchers. ‘In 15 years at DFID, I have never been asked DFID is concerned about corruption, and hence why DFID is working on it. Ministers have to defend a simple, stark message – no Minister will stand up in Parliament and say ‘well, some corruption is worse than others’.’

In such a climate, if you argue that some corruption is actually not that important, is a symptom of a particular stage of development, is really just an informal tax, or may even be helpful (for example in achieving political stability after a civil war, by buying off opponents) you will rapidly be denounced as an apologist for corruption and cast into the political outer darkness. A problem as all of those views are more or less correct, in some places, some of the time.

That political profile also means ministers demand big splashy anti-corruption projects, even if they don’t work, rather than obliquity-style attempts to tackle corruption as part of something else. ‘Our taxpayers won’t let it disappear from the agenda.’ A further problem for bilateral donors is that anti-corruption work is very different to traditional partnerships on health, education or infrastructure. Health or transport ministers are more or less interested in the latter, but on corruption, politicians are often the de facto enemy. So tech fixes and public service capacity building won’t work (they don’t work that well in normal circumstances, let alone in this!). What you get instead is an ‘act of complicit theatre between donors and governments – lots of technical assistance programmes, while business carries on as normal. Tackling the fundamentals is far harder.’ Somalia is apparently setting up an anti-corruption body. Enough said.
Mushtaq Khan, for decades one of the clearest thinkers on corruption, was in the audience and made some great points. He reckons that short-term aid programmes have little chance of success in promoting systemic change – the way that over several decades, interactions between police, judiciary, private sector and politicians become less corrupt as a country develops and institutionalises. Instead, he argues for a more acupuncture approach, identifying small, specific problems like customs corruption in the garments sector, and then following a PDIA-type process of getting broad agreement on the problem, and convening the right individuals and institutions to sort it out.

If we do that, and add some historical positive deviance approaches, where instead of thinking about our interventions (hammers, nails), we identify and analyse real world cases where corruption has fallen, we might have the beginnings of a more intelligent approach. But you’d have to sell that to donor politicians first.