

# Corruption

*Elizabeth Harrison*

---

*This article engages with the ways in which corruption has taken centre stage in much development policy making and rhetoric. It argues that there is a need to destabilise 'taken for granted' assumptions about what corruption is and how it operates. This means generating an understanding of how meanings of corruption vary, and how this variation is determined by the social characteristics of those engaged in corruption talk. It also means examination of how discourses of corruption and anti-corruption are translated from international to national and local stages – from the anti-corruption 'establishment' to the realities of bureaucratic encounters in diverse contexts.*

KEY WORDS: Governance and Public Policy; Methods

What is the value in dissecting the use of the word 'corruption' in development rhetoric? Like most of the expressions examined in this issue, 'corruption' is frequently used sloppily, and its use may disguise political agendas, or further the interests of the powerful. 'Corruption' is unlike some of the more bland development 'buzzwords' (*social protection, harmonisation, country ownership*), in that they primarily describe fashionable ways of getting development done. There is more to it than this, perhaps because 'corruption' describes not so much how to get things done, but something that is perceived to be hampering those efforts. 'Corruption' is also similar to 'poverty', in that it attempts to describe something, however inadequately, which exists 'in the real world' and can make people's lives miserable.

When it comes to 'corruption', destabilising its 'taken for granted' quality might help us to better identify where corruption hurts, and whom. This means understanding what corruption means for different people, who is able to define an act as corrupt or not, and who is included in or excluded from discourses of corruption. This is not to present a relativistic position where, for example, corruption is re-labelled as 'gift giving' and thus excused as culturally acceptable. Rather it is about understanding the social characteristics which influence corruption talk: gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and so on may all play a role, as will differential engagement with international anti-corruption discourses themselves.

## Corruption takes centre stage

The profile of 'corruption' in development talk has grown hugely in recent years. On the international stage, anti-corruption work takes a prominent place in the work of both bilateral and

multilateral donors. From the time of James Wolfensohn's speech in 1996, when he famously, and for some, shockingly, referred to the 'cancer of corruption' in Africa, the World Bank has taken a leading role in the anti-corruption 'crusade' (Sampson 2005). Others, such as the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID), have dedicated teams focused on the control of corruption. In the 2005 Report of the Commission for Africa, corruption control takes a prominent place as a vital part of the solution to the continent's ills. The NGO Transparency International (TI) has chapters in 85 countries, all devoted to campaigning against and exposing corruption. It is funded both by the major donors and by businesses keen to be associated with more transparent and virtuous business practices. The world of anti-corruption produces significant research, its findings largely disseminated through a range of anti-corruption portals, such as CORIS and ANCORR.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Internet has provided a medium in which the volume of anti-corruption information and analysis is so large as to be almost unmanageable.

Concern with corruption is not just a phenomenon of donor development discourse. In both Northern and Southern countries, there is a mounting focus on transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. The Right to Information Movement in India has had significant success in bringing corrupt bureaucrats to account. Anti-corruption campaigners such as John Githongo in Kenya have a high profile and are, rightly, celebrated for speaking out, often putting themselves at personal risk. When the UK High Commissioner to Kenya, Edward Clay, condemned that country's corruption in rather colourful terms, he was fêted in the British media.<sup>2</sup>

And who could argue with the need for more freedom of speech, and the exposure of corrupt and money-grabbing politician or bureaucrats? But when we look closer, the targets of anti-corruption talk become more slippery, less easy to identify. To be sure, a Minister salting donor funds away in a foreign bank is a problem. But what about an agricultural extension worker favouring his brother in the delivery of farm inputs – or, indeed, the brother who receives those inputs? Are they as morally culpable, and how are we to decide? To what extent should we take into account the constraints under which they operate, or the other moral considerations that may be coming into play? As Pardo argues,

*...in any given society corruption is a changing phenomenon, some of its aspects and received morality are culturally specific and its conceptualization is affected by personal interest, cultural values and socio-economic status. In this key sense, corruption needs to be treated contextually and diachronically.* (Pardo 2004: 2)

## On rhetoric and meaning

There is a well-developed literature on the definition and meaning of corruption, much of it arising from social anthropology. This explores the nuances between *bribery*, *nepotism*, *graft*, *extortion* and so on, and reflects on the relationships between people and bureaucracies (for example, Leys 1965; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Gupta 1995; Miller *et al.* 2001; Parry 2000). However, when it comes to the control of corruption in development policy making and public statements, such nuance tends to disappear. More complicated views or definitions become reduced to short phrases with a strong rhetorical quality, which become accepted as truths and articles of faith. Thus, for many years, the generally accepted definition of corruption was '*the abuse of public office for private gain*'. This implies a firm dichotomy between the public/impersonal and the private/personal spheres, and the importance of keeping the two separate. It is derived from a Weberian notion of rational–legal bureaucratic organisation. However, unlike for Weber, who was clear that this was an ideal type which 'cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality' (Weber 1949: 90), such a bureaucratic ideal is

sometimes presented as a basic model from which to develop policy. For example, in 2004, the World Bank funded a study which examined the 'Weberianess' of individual governments (Evans and Rauch 2004).

A series of scandals involving private-sector firms such as Enron and Worldcom in the USA has prompted some rethinking of the 'abuse of public office' definition. Transparency International and others now refer to '*the abuse of trusted authority for private gain*'. Nonetheless, this still relies on a fairly simplified distinction between the public and private spheres, and glosses over whether, for example, those involved in particular acts see them as corrupt or not. Once the definition has been accepted and repeated, the problems with understanding its application do not trouble its users. Thus, the widespread acceptance that Africa is riddled with corruption like a diseased body is not scrutinised.

Such a view is compounded by the popularity of measures such as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). The CPI, developed by TI, is a composite measure which brings together the views of 'chief financial officers', 'executives in top and middle management', and 'US-resident country experts', as well as a number of other categories of 'business experts' (TI 2005). It reports on perceptions of levels of corruption in more than 150 countries and publishes results in a form of league table in which we can see which countries are perceived to be more, and which less, corrupt. Not surprisingly, Scandinavian countries top the league, while at the bottom Southern, particularly African, countries predominate. In the 2005 CPI, Bangladesh and Chad had the dubious distinction of coming last, while Iceland was at the top. The CPI has obvious attractions, particularly for donors seeking to justify anti-corruption efforts. The fact that it is a measure only of 'perceptions', not of corrupt practices, is seldom treated as important. Nor is the fact that those on whose opinion it relies are likely to be educated, articulate, and share a particular worldview and set of values about the negative effects of corruption.

To be fair, the CPI has been criticised recently, most strongly by one of its originators, Fredrik Galtung, who has left TI to be part of a new anti-corruption network, Tiri ([www.tiri.org](http://www.tiri.org)). Galtung (2005) has argued that the CPI has a number of significant failings. These include the fact that it relies on an imprecise, yet narrow, definition of corruption, focuses only on the takers and not the givers, and draws its information from often ignorant sources. To respond to criticism, TI now also produces a Bribe-Payers Index (BPI) and the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB). The GCB polled 55,000 people in 69 countries in 2005 to hear their perceptions about corruption. According to TI, it 'takes the temperature of the people whose lives and views are touched by corruption' (TI 2005). Significantly, however, this is still only a measure of 'perceptions'.

Research from anthropology suggests that perceptions of corruption may in fact bear little relationship to its incidence. For example, Parry's (2000) ethnography of a government-run steel plant in Madhya Pradesh, India, indicates that, while there was a strong perception that it was virtually impossible to get a job without recourse to an intermediary, in practice very few people actually paid bribes for employment. Parry argues that this illustrates the internalisation, rather than the rejection, of particular values of bureaucratic practice. 'Corruption has seemed to get worse and worse not (only) because it has, but also because it subverts a set of values to which people are increasingly committed' (Parry 2000: 53). Arguably, the very success of anti-corruption rhetoric may result in more and more people believing that corruption *is* a problem. The more there is talk about the problem of corruption, the more widely it is perceived to be a national blight.

The Global Corruption Barometer is seen as a tool to combat 'corruption', but behind its impressive and emotive language, the slipperiness about what corruption *is* persists. For the GCB, the focus is 'bribery', and the argument is made that 'corruption's impact on personal

and family life is most dramatic on poor households' (TI 2005). But petty bribery, the kind that makes a young mother lose hope for the future because she believes that securing her child's health requires a 'hand under the table', is not the same as the kind of grand corruption that much anti-corruption rhetoric focuses upon. Some might say it is worse, or that it is what really matters. Others might stress how single acts of grand corruption do much more harm. The differences between different practices which are all lumped together as 'corruption' lie in the different conceptions of what kind of moral boundary line has been crossed in particular instances. This is something that is not part of the moral certainty that drives anti-corruption rhetoric. But, in classifying corruption as a simple phenomenon, the diverse ways in which people engage with morality are overlooked. Comprehension of how opportunities are shaped, both to engage in and to escape from corruption, is important. It seldom occurs.

## Why corruption has come to matter – and why now?

So why has anti-corruption become so pre-eminent in donor discourse, with such under-specification of what corruption itself is? Two opposed explanations are possible. On the one hand, there are those who strongly associate themselves with anti-corruption and for whom academic speculation about contested moralities is at best a waste of time and at worst a dangerous diversion. For these, the pre-eminence of corruption in international discourse is merely and self-evidently a reflection of the importance of the phenomenon. It may also be something of a moral victory for those who have 'right' on their side. On the other hand is a growing body of scholars who see the growth of anti-corruption as part of a project of 'normalisation' (Hindess 2004). Among these are those such as Szeftel, who has argued (1998) that the anti-corruption agenda fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the state in Africa; and Brown and Cloke (2004), who see it as the manifestation of a neo-liberal policy agenda. For several, anti-corruption is closely associated with the governance agenda in development, itself a manifestation of greater intrusion of neo-liberalism in the architecture of aid. Szeftel also suggests that anti-corruption may reflect a desire to both explain and divert attention from the failure of structural-adjustment policies. These criticisms together become even more pertinent when the accountability and moral purity of international development institutions themselves are called into question. Has insufficient attention been paid to the internal anti-corruption mechanisms of such institutions? And does the focus on anti-corruption, with its attendant increase in privatisation, concessions, and contracting-out, in turn open the door for greater corruption among multinational corporations (Hall 1999; Hawley 2000)?

Of course, the answer lies somewhere in between. Corruption does exist, *and* its pre-eminence in international discourse is not innocent of neo-liberal values. To develop this point, reflection on the working of the anti-corruption 'establishment' itself is valuable. Like all discourses, that of anti-corruption does not exist in an institutional vacuum: it is used and developed by particular actors and demonstrates particular sets of practices. In examining this world, a picture emerges which may imply less intentionality than a neo-liberal conspiracy, but which goes some way towards explaining the nature of anti-corruption talk.

In this, the role of academic discipline emerges as significant. The World Bank is now a (perhaps *the*) major player in anti-corruption activity (Marquette 2003; Polzer 2001). Despite its nominal independence, TI has strong links with the Bank, and was indeed founded by former Bank employees, whose connections have been important in its rapid growth. From being an organisation whose Articles of Confederation forbade its involvement in 'politics', the Bank has now come to accept the intimate connection between politics and economic outcomes. The Bank is also, despite some shifts, still dominated by economists. Arguably, the way that the Bank has defined and used the concept of corruption is influenced by this.

Corruption becomes something that it is legitimate for the Bank to pronounce upon, precisely because it becomes defined as an economic concept. For example, the formula developed by Klitgaard – ‘*Corruption may be represented as following a simple formula:  $C = M + D - A$ . Corruption equals Monopoly plus Discretion minus Accountability*’ (Klitgaard 1998: 4) – is widely quoted.

There are parallels with the arguments that Ben Fine (2001; see also his contribution in this issue) has made with regard to the concept of social capital: that economics has succeeded in ‘colonising’ the other social sciences, by applying its methods to non-market and non-economic relations and treating them as if they were all economic. In this way, the world is characterised as more predictable and controllable than it actually is.

## The world of anti-corruption

Beyond the dominance of economics, there are other processes at work. Recent research by Steven Sampson into anti-corruption activity in the Balkans, including that of TI, has revealed that the world of anti-corruption is a complex one, involving a confluence of money and power with strongly held moral and ethical beliefs (Sampson 2005). It is significant that the field of anti-corruption has become increasingly well funded. This is effectively illustrated by the professionalism and high fees charged at a series of prestigious anti-corruption conferences. TI itself administers more than €6 million of donated funds. Accordingly, those with undoubtedly strong moral imperatives have also become caught up in a struggle for resources which Sampson labels ‘projectisation’. In this, simple formulas and descriptions of corruption become important for attracting grants and ‘technical assistance’. The idea of the ‘Corruption Fighters’ Toolkit’ (a product from TI) is attractive in its simplicity; it is also eminently fundable. This is not to imply that all anti-corruption activity is a cynical attempt to obtain funding. However, it does account somewhat for the processes of simplification.

The world of anti-corruption described by Sampson is an important part of the picture. Equally important are the ways in which its messages are translated and adapted into different settings, from the Kenyan national anti-corruption discourse, with its ‘gluttonous politicians’, to the ‘crisis of corruption’ in an Indian steel plant, or the ‘young woman seeking health care’ for her child. Corruption is a word with distinctly Western origins. The ways in which it is used in different, especially non-Western, contexts will reflect a complicated mixture of interpretation, moral judgement, and opportunism. Reflecting on this picture requires keeping in mind that corruption is *both* a normative concept and a set of practices with effects that can hurt people.

## Conclusion

‘Corruption’, but more particularly the anti-corruption lobby that has expanded so dramatically in recent years, needs closer examination. Riding on a wave of righteous virtue, anti-corruption talk comes from diverse quarters and, for many, is unquestionable. Indeed, to do so is slightly heretical; corruption is so obviously harmful that querying this is equivalent to excusing immorality. As I have discussed, there are good reasons to have some sympathy with this position. However, in lumping together all ‘corruption’ under the same heading, the anti-corruption lobby underplays the very different meanings that are attached to diverse transactions. More significantly, it also provides a neat explanation for the ills of both countries and continents that leaves moral culpability entirely with the supposedly corrupt. Ethnographic engagement with practices that are seen as corrupt may be valuable. Equally, though, such engagement needs to extend to questions of how, and why, anti-corruption has risen to its current prominence.

## Notes

1. CORIS is Transparency International's anti-corruption information service; ANCORR is the OECD's anti-corruption website.
2. The text of his speech includes the following: 'We never expected corruption to be vanquished overnight. We all implicitly recognised that some would be carried over to the new era. We hoped that it would not be rammed in our faces. But it has: evidently the practitioners now in government have the arrogance, greed and perhaps a desperate sense of panic to lead them to eat like gluttons. They may expect we shall not see, or notice, or will forgive them a bit of gluttony because they profess to like Oxfam lunches. But they can hardly expect us not to care when their gluttony causes them to vomit all over our shoes'; available at <http://bbc.co.uk>, (retrieved 3 August 2004).

## References

- Brown, E. and J. Cloke** (2004) 'Neoliberal reform, governance and corruption in the South: assessing the international anti-corruption crusade', *Antipode* 36(2): 272–94.
- Evans, P. and J. Rauch** (2004) 'Bureaucracy and Growth: A Cross National Analysis of the Effects of 'Weberian' State Structures on Economic Growth', <http://sociology.berkeley.edu/faculty/evans/burperf.html> (retrieved 6 December 2006).
- Fine, B., C. Lapavistas, and J. Pincus (eds.)** (2001) *Development Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London: Routledge.
- Galtung, F.** (2005) 'Measuring the immeasurable: boundaries and functions of (macro) corruption indices' in F. Galtung and C. Sampford (eds.) *Measuring Corruption*, London: Ashgate.
- Gupta, A.** (1995) 'Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics and the imagined state', *American Ethnologist* 22(2): 375–402.
- Hall, D.** (1999) 'Privatisation, multinationals and corruption', *Development in Practice* 9(5): 539–56.
- Hawley, S.** (2000) *Exporting Corruption: Privatisation, Multinationals and Bribery*, The Corner House, Briefing No.19, Dorset: The Corner House, available at [www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/item.shtml?x=51975](http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/item.shtml?x=51975) (retrieved 6 December 2006).
- Hindess, B.** (2004) 'International Anti-corruption as a Program of Normalization', paper presented at the ISA Conference, Montreal, 17–20 March.
- Klitgaard, R.** (1998) 'International cooperation against corruption', *Finance and Development*, March, pp. 3–6, available at [www.worldbank.org/fandd/english/pdfs/0398/080398.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/fandd/english/pdfs/0398/080398.pdf) (retrieved 5 December 2006).
- Leys, C.** (1965) 'What is the problem about corruption?', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 3(2): 215–24.
- Marquette, H.** (2003) *Corruption, Politics and Development: The Role of the World Bank*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Miller, W. L., A. B. Grodeland, and T. Y. Koshechikina** (2001) *A Culture of Corruption? Coping With Government in Post-Communist Europe*, Bucharest: Central European University Press.
- Olivier de Sardan, J.-P.** (1999) 'African corruption in the context of globalisation', in R. Fardon, W. van Binsbergen, and R. van Dijk (eds.) *Modernity on a Shoestring: Dimensions of Globalisation, Consumption and Development in Africa and Beyond*, Leiden and London: EIDOS.
- Pardo, I. (ed.)** (2004) *Between Morality and the Law: Corruption, Anthropology and Comparative Society*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Parry, J.** (2000) 'The crisis of corruption and the idea of India – a worm's eye view', in I. Pardo (ed.) *Morals of Legitimacy: Between Agency and System*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Polzer, T.** (2001) 'Corruption: deconstructing the World Bank discourse', *Working Papers Number 01–18*, London: Development Studies Institute, LSE.
- Sampson, S.** (2005) 'Integrity warriors: global morality and the anticorruption movement in the Balkans', in C. Shore and D. Haller (eds.) *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*, London: Pluto Press.
- Szeftel, M.** (1998) 'Misunderstanding African politics: corruption and the governance agenda', *Review of African Political Economy* 76: 221–40.

**Transparency International** (2005) 'Global Corruption Barometer', [www.transparency.org/news\\_room/latest\\_news/press\\_releases/2005/09\\_12\\_2005\\_barometer\\_2005](http://www.transparency.org/news_room/latest_news/press_releases/2005/09_12_2005_barometer_2005) (retrieved 6 December 2006).

**Weber, M.** (1952) 'The essentials of bureaucratic organization: an ideal type construction' in R. K. Merton, A. P. Gray, B. Hockey, and H. C. Selvin (eds.) *Reader in Bureaucracy*, New York, NY: The Free Press.

## The author

**Elizabeth Harrison** is a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sussex. Her research has been broadly within the 'anthropology of development', and has included work on the generation and use of key concepts within development thinking, with a focus on gender and participation. She has conducted most of her field-based research in sub-Saharan Africa, and more recently in the UK. Contact details: University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ, UK. <[e.a.harrison@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:e.a.harrison@sussex.ac.uk)>