

Corruption: a wicked problem

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On the last occasion on which I spoke here CW had only just opened its doors. We have now been going for some 16 months. We've achieved some notable successes but, above all, have learned just how 'wicked' a problem corruption is. By using the term 'wicked' to describe the category of problem that is corruption, I am not simply saying that corruption is evil. I am rather using the term to describe the unusual resistance of the problem of corruption to resolution. I am describing a problem that is unusually difficult to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize, and a problem where, because of complex interdependencies, the effort to solve one aspect of a problem may reveal or create other problems.

Let me give you some examples of the 'wickedness' of the problem of corruption:

- Take the exercise of discretion on the part of public officials. This is thought to provide critical opportunities for corruption. But the elimination of discretion reduces the flexibility and interpretative aspects that are critical elements in rational decision making.
- Or we all know that tight supportive networks – otherwise known as 'communities' – are key elements not only in achieving social cohesion but in promoting economic growth and equality – think of anything from the industrial districts of Italy, to the Chinese diaspora, to tight faith-based communities like the Moslem community or the Jewish community. But they are also exclusionary and potential platforms for nepotism, generally considered a particularly damaging act of corruption and the basis for even greater corruption.
- What about lobbying – particularly of government and lawmakers by big business? It's the basis for much grand corruption. But it is also a principal form of communication that provides the information necessary for sound legislation and governmental decision-making and that provides the certainty necessary for making investment decisions.
- Or when is a gift an expression of courtesy and when is it a bribe? And do all societies and cultures draw the line in the same place?
- Or most difficult: It's tempting – and by no means without good reason – to appeal to ethics and morality as the principal approach to confronting corruption. But in the context of great inequality and systemic corruption – where corruption is not merely an aspect of the system, but is *the* system, a simple appeal to morality may gloss over some important complexities. In '*Behind the Beautiful Forevers*' Katherine Boo's extraordinary account of life in a Mumbai slum, she writes:

'A government-sponsored women's self-help group looked somewhat promising, now that she knew how to game it. The programme was supposed to encourage financially vulnerable women to pool their savings and make low-interest loans to one another in times of need. But Asha's self-help group preferred to lend the pooled money at high interest to poorer women whom they had excluded from the collective....

“The big people think that because we are poor we don’t understand much” she said to her children. Asha understood plenty. She was a chit in a national game of make-believe, in which many of India’s old problems – poverty, disease, illiteracy, child labour – were being aggressively addressed. Meanwhile the other old problems, corruption and exploitation of the weak by the less weak, continued with minimal interference.

‘In the West, and among some in the Indian elite, this word ‘*corruption*’, had purely negative connotations; it was seen as blocking India’s modern, global ambitions. But for the poor of a country where corruption thieved a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained.’

So is Asha’s conduct destructively dishonest, or admirably entrepreneurial and efficient? I can easily imagine an economist telling us that Asha’s conduct ensures that the slightly less weak – Asha and the women who pool their resources – have not only found a way of making money from the margin that they charge the most poor, but that they have found a way of getting funding to the most marginalised, the weakest members of the community. They have done what the financial system and the western donors could never do. They have efficiently addressed a serious failure in financial markets.

I could go on but you probably get my point. You may want to insist that while, like an elephant, corruption is difficult to define, it is nevertheless easy to recognise. And in many instances you’d be right – there is no doubting the proverbial brown envelope exchanged to influence a tender process. But in too many instances you may be wrong, or, at least, you may be expressing a view that was full of unspoken social, cultural, ethnic and class assumptions. I doubt though that any of you would claim that corruption is easy to combat. In particular while law enforcement is a vital instrument in tackling corruption, anyone who believes that it can be combated by serial prosecutions alone would be seriously deluding himself.

Which is why I firmly believe that our model is such a vital element in tackling a ‘wicked’ problem like corruption. As you may remember the central pillar of our approach is to encourage the public to report their experiences of corruption. This contributes two key ingredients to the fight against corruption.

- First, it generates vital intelligence without which it is not possible to fight corruption. This intelligence ranges from understanding the public’s perceptions – and misperceptions – of the nature, extent and impact of corruption through to providing empirical data of hotspots of corruption. I’ll take you through some of the lessons in a minute.
- Secondly, it provides the public with the opportunity to actively engage in combating corruption. I’ll take you through the theory of change implicit in engaging the public in combatting corruption.

So what are the lessons that we have learned? Let me take you through 6 lessons learned.

- First, our reports, which number just over 4000, are attaining the volumes that enable us to identify hot spots and sites and practices of corruption that are of greatest public concern. Hence a significant volume of reports concern corruption in schools and in the management

of small town municipal resources. This enables us to mount focused campaigns like the one that we are in the process of generating around schools corruption. This not only enables us to take the fight into those areas of most concern to our reporters but it also enables us to identify a manageable and coherent cohort of stakeholders and it enables us to both encourage exposure of further instances of corruption but also to identify solutions.

- Secondly, and taking off from the first lesson, it dispels the myth that corruption is a suburban pre-occupation. For those in the leafy suburbs, corruption is, more often than not something that they read about in the Sunday papers. For those in the townships, corruption is the extra class room that didn't get built, and the sports team who didn't get their equipment because a school principal or a school governing body spent the money on a weekend team building exercise in Mozambique.
- Thirdly, and again building on the previous point, 'petty' corruption is not at all petty. In fact we need to find another way of describing those individual acts of corruption that do not on their own involve massive amounts of money, but that nevertheless constitute the daily lived experience of the vast majority of members of the public and that both undermine their quality of life – the payment to get into the housing queue, the payment to get your ARV prescription filled, the computers and text books that never arrived – and that constitute their most frequent interfaces with public servants and elected officials and so which undermine their faith in the public sector and in the political system.
- Fourthly, there is a strong interplay between deficient service delivery and corruption. We initially excluded what appeared to be service delivery complaints (as we do consumer and industrial relations complaints) from our definition of corruption. But the response of the public has persuaded us to change this approach. Undoubtedly what is perceived as deficient service delivery frequently reflects genuine fiscal constraints and disappointed expectations. It also reflects managerial shortcomings rather than the wilful diversion of public resources into private hands although some of these managerial shortcomings are so gross, reflect such negligence and a lack of care, as to constitute criminal and corrupt conduct. But undoubtedly many instances of deficient service delivery are rooted in corruption. And more than this if the perception is of corruption is so rampant as to constitute the basis for all deficient service delivery it becomes impossible to have a public discussion about resource constraints or about the distribution of resources. So a discussion about whether to allocate scarce public resources to building a community hall or a new class room is not possible if everybody believes that the discussion is less about which project most benefits the community and more about which particular group of individuals get their hands on the public resources.
- Fifth, and this is a deep manifestation of the 'wickedness' of the problem of corruption, we have learned how fragmented and decentralised corruption really is. While the national newspapers are pre-occupied with big national stories and corruption in national government or large corporations or in the ranks of the national ruling party, the truth is that each province, each school, each public hospital constitutes a semi-autonomous site of corruption, often better organised and more easily hidden from scrutiny than in the case of a big national acts of corruption. Interest groups have clustered around each of these decentralised sites of corruption. In the Eastern Cape Province alone there are said to be about 9000 procurement points. This not only means that there are multiple sites of resistance to reform each with their own set of interests that have to be confronted; it also

makes it easier for the perpetrators to abandon one site without compromising other sites and without exposing those at higher levels who often have interests in many sites of corruption. Combating the corruption of small town municipal finances appears particularly vulnerable to these problems of organised localised opposition to reform by powerful local interests, but also enables those in the provincial capital who have engineered the appointment of the municipal manager to excise one site which has become exposed to law enforcement or the media without compromising multiple other sites.

- Sixth, gross abuses of power may often generate greater public outrage – and hence public participation in a project like CW – than more costly abuses of public resources. These two broad categories of corruption – abuse of public resources and abuse of public power – often operate in tandem. But take the Gupta scandal. It didn't represent a great cost to the country when measured in monetary terms. But it was a display of extraordinary privilege and gross impunity, a graphic display of inequality, the repercussions of which will be profound.

So how will public participation of the sort that CW encourages contribute to a resolution of the wicked problem of corruption?

It undoubtedly generates the sort of intelligence and insights identified above which underpins a more focused, better informed fight against corruption. As I've said throughout this address we are dealing with a wicked problem, a problem of great complexity that will not be solved by high flown rhetoric or even by high minded intentions alone. We need robust law enforcement for sure; we need a political leadership that is beyond reproach. That we have neither is undoubtedly a significant contributor to corruption. But even if we had them we would still confront a problem of large and immensely complex dimensions that has to be tackled with well-informed policies and programmes.

But this too will be insufficient. We need a well-informed public whose views and experiences are foregrounded and who are actively engaged in fighting corruption.

This then is the principal reason why we need an independent platform that represents a voice which will be difficult to ignore if its volume is amplified and its targets are focused. We are often asked 'what do you do with your reports?' 'Where are your teeth?' 'Are you not just a talk-shop?'

Let me attempt to answer these perfectly reasonable questions:

So what we do with our reports? With our reports we generate the sort of intelligence that I have just spoken about. The intelligence that enables us to focus our resources on high-impact campaigns, that includes campaigns for policy change. We investigate a select number of individual acts of corruption and we hand over the fruits of our investigations to the relevant authorities but we also work with the full range of media platforms to ensure that perpetrators are named and shamed and that the public is made aware that there are consequences for engaging in corruption. We select high-impact cases to investigate. I keep on stressing 'high-impact' because the real point of these campaigns and investigations is to demonstrate to the public that there is point in talking out, in reporting, in the hope that more will talk out because it is the volume of noise generated by this talking that will make the authorities sit up and listen.

And it's working. There is a discernible change in the environment surrounding corruption. One needs to look at the measures contemplated by the Minister of Public Service and Administration, Lindiwe Sisulu. Or at the positions taken by among others Ministers Manuel, Gordhan and Motsoaledi and by institutions like the Auditor General's office and the Public Protector. The reason why these and other senior elected representatives and senior officials are acting with a definite sense of urgency is because they perceive the public's outrage and they recognise the impact that corruption is having on the quality of public life and on their own standing and electability. They have literally 'got the message'. While I don't for one moment want to over-claim our role in this, I am confident that we have had an impact and I am confident that our impact is attributable to the fact that we speak with the authority of those who have reported to us. If we are listened to when we have 4000 reports, can you imagine what our impact will be with 40 000 reports, or 400 000? If the education authorities in Gauteng are prepared to engage constructively with us because we are in possession of a few hundred reports of corruption in education, think how several thousand or tens of thousands of reports would strengthen their resolve. And so the answer to the question: 'where are our teeth'? I have to say that our teeth are in your mouth.

And so are we a talk shop? Maybe but active citizens talking loudly and forthrightly is the mechanism of change in a democratic society because it will force those in power to listen and take action, or to account for their inaction. I'm aware that 'accountability' is an overused and somewhat clichéd term. But I have no doubt that is the essential factor in resolving the wicked problem of corruption.

So in summary then, our principle mechanism is encouraging the public to report experiences of corruption. We will amplify and focus that voice. We will confront those with the power and resources to drive change. We will report their responses back to the public. We will in short attempt to hold those in power accountable to those who have elected them and those who are custodians of the resources that belong to the public. There is no other way.