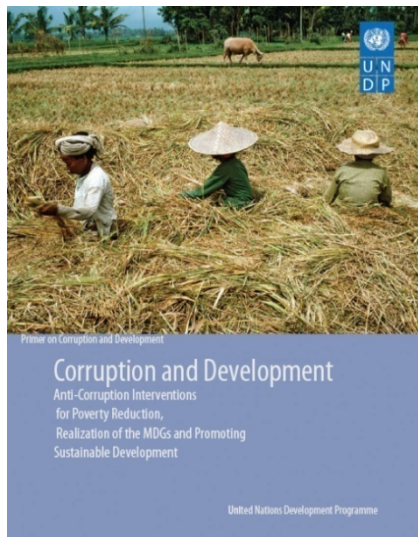


Parliamentary Development: Tackling Corruption

By Niall Johnston

Corruption is a clear threat to development, democracy and to international security. It distorts economic development and subverts political decision-making, stunting growth and creating political instability. Corruption is closely linked to failing public institutions and failed policies, undermining the legitimacy of governments. It drains national finances, acting as a major disincentive to serious foreign investment as well as destroying the work ethic of citizens. Corruption can have a profound negative impact on patriotism and commitment to the national goals and ideals. But, above all, it deepens poverty. These factors combined show why combating corruption is an issue for parliaments and parliamentarians worldwide.



Corruption is not an issue solely for the developing world – in many developed countries it has taken a long time for their system of government and parliament to become relatively free and clean. There are examples of both political and financial corruption in mature democracies: a judicial inquiry in Canada on a scheme to promote federalism in Quebec exposed corrupt mismanagement which resulted in the minority government losing a confidence vote in the House of Commons and a election on 23 January, 2006. However it is fair to conclude that good governance and leadership in

developing countries is increasingly being judged by efforts to tackle corruption.

A plethora of important international anti-corruption conventions have been agreed in the last few years including the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions and The African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption. For global initiatives to work, however, there needs to be implementation and scrutiny at home. Parliamentarians need to hold their governments to account by urging ratification of these international conventions. Transparency, accountability, and good governance are the principles in the campaign for effective democratic – and ethical – government.

Corruption is a parliamentary issue on two levels – first parliamentarians everywhere must set an example and uphold high standards of propriety. Public coffers are not Members’ or the government’s personal funds to finance irresponsible spending. Lawmakers must be beyond reproach: “We can’t demand standards of others that we are not prepared to live up to ourselves. Without “clean hands” what right do we have to question the actions of others? And what credibility do we have to pursue issues our electors care about?” Respect for politicians and for political institutions is ultimately dependent on the collective ethical behaviour of individual Members.

Second, Members are elected to improve the lives of the people who elected them. Of course Parliaments often lack the experienced Members and the financial and human resources necessary for them to do what they were elected to do and the work and initiatives of NGOs and multilateral

organizations such as Transparency International, the World Bank and the OECD as well as parliamentary organizations such as the CPA and GOPAC are of great importance. One lesson learned from the World Bank Institute's work with parliamentarians is the importance of networks in developing capacity and improving effectiveness of parliaments and parliamentarians in developing countries. By helping to establish, or working within, broad anti-corruption coalitions parliamentarians can aid their own professional development and increase mutual understanding.

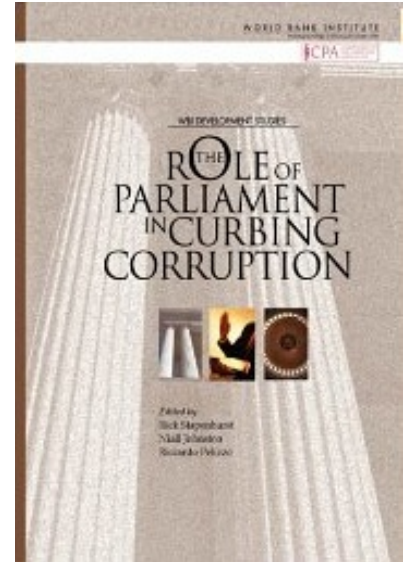
Parliaments can play an indispensable role across many aspects of an anti-corruption strategy. Naturally, there has to be political commitment at the highest level and without doubt malpractice at the highest level will undermine trust in the political system as a whole. However, leadership is a necessary but not sufficient condition for controlling corruption if for no other reason than that tackling corruption can unleash opposition to reform.

A robust system of checks and balances and strong political institutions is therefore critical not only to combat corruption and promote good governance, but also to restoring trust and confidence in democratic politics. In the past anti-corruption efforts have tended to focus on the executive branch or on the oversight role of the legislative branch, but parliaments can play an indispensable role across many aspects of an anti-corruption strategy.

It is essential to build a sound social and political foundation for reform targeting the institutions of the state, the private sector, civil society, the political system, and public administration. In short any strategy to tackle corruption needs to be holistic, focusing on preventative measures as well as enforcement. Parliaments can play an indispensable role across many aspects of an anti-corruption strategy through their legislative, oversight, financial and representative functions. There are a wide variety of tools that may be considered – some of which may be more effective in one parliament than another. While no one step will be able to effectively eliminate corruption, a combination

of measures can guard against corruption in government. Above all, there must be acceptance that any democratic system needs to recognise the three broad principles of openness, accountability and integrity.

In practice, however, Parliament's ability to curb corruption will depend to a large extent on how independent they are from direct government control. For example governments in many countries are reluctant to relinquish their Ministerial control of both the finances of



the parliament and its administration. In other countries the parliament is simply used as a rubber stamp for the government programme, and is only called to sit at the whim of Ministerial authority. In short, too often it is the government which controls parliament and not the other way around. In these countries Parliament must be strengthened to ensure it acts as the principle institution of democracy, holding governments to account and ensuring resources are not diverted away from the millions of people in poverty. This is the challenge facing all stakeholders working towards good governance and development.