

# CORRUPTION

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The Commonwealth, the Secretariat and its Member States, are united in their values: democracy, freedom, peace, the rule of law, and opportunity for all. However, there is a discrepancy between these standards and the conditions of many nations in Africa and the South Pacific, whose countries make up a significant portion of the Commonwealth.

Why is it that so many countries in those areas of the world are still far 'behind' in terms of social and economic development? A country's history is a major indicator of how developed they are—many countries with a consistent history of instability (warfare, political and social tension) also have a lack of infrastructure and social services. In other words, the government's weaknesses directly translate into the citizens' suffering.

This might seem fairly obvious. However, what is less conspicuous is the culture of corruption that underlie these social and economic issues. This "culture of corruption" can be evident when evaluating governments consisting of family or clan members, government spending unaccounted for, and a lack of support for well-informed media. The effects from this culture has trickling effects in civil society, often permeating the everyday life of citizens; corruption can tint an entire nation, holding its economy and society back from healthy development.

Of the factors that contribute to state mistrust and government inefficiency, few are as damaging as corruption, and especially, its cost. Corrupted government structures drive up the cost of development, hinder the deployment of newer, more efficient practices, and can lead to an ever-widening gap between the 'have' and the 'have-nots'. In Bangladesh, the culture of corruption has become so prevalent in the social and political environment that even doctors at government clinics might refuse to treat a child without a bribe. As people begin to associate government positions with private gain, a sense of entitlement to the proceeds of an office will result in continued corruption, no matter who is appointed to that position. Other examples, not specific to Bangladesh, include everyday realities faced by citizens: parents having to do without shoes to pay bribes for their children to attend free, government schools;

shopowners who earn next to nothing because they must bribe their local inspectors; mothers who must pay three or four times the price for a drug needed for her sick child. “Corruption is both a cause of poverty, and a barrier to overcoming it.” Clearly, the fight against corruption is not a quick solution, but rather, a long-term strategy, with the end goal of not only removing it from society, but ensuring that it will not return to take hold.

In the same literature on corruption, anti-corruption is just as relevant. While corruption refers to the “abuse of public office for personal gain”, anti-corruption refers to a counter-culture that large-scale, international organizations have developed to address it. Corruption undermines democracy and the rule of law; it threatens good governance; infringes on people’s individual rights; and has dire consequences in the development of a nation. Anti-corruption goals hold countries accountable for their rule of law, budget and spending, at the international, national, and civil levels. Transparency largely accounts for how countries are surveyed—an index is typically calculated by a selection of national and international surveys. (Transparency International (TI) is one of the most relevant global civil society organizations in this respect.)

Nigeria, situated across the Niger River delta, is a land of fantastic potential wealth. At 158 million people, it is the 8th largest country by population, with one of the world’s fastest growing economies, at 6.4% in 2008 and 5.3% in 2009. Nigeria is also Africa’s largest oil exporter, with nearly 2 million barrels exported per day. In fact, it successfully repaid all of its development loans, approximately \$30 billion in 2006. However, while the success of Nigeria is not to be scoffed at, it is agreed that it still has a long way to go in order to eradicate the endemic corruption, a holdover from the last 20 years of military rule, and the political instability of the country. This is not to say that nothing has been done. Rather, Nigeria’s first elected president, Olusegun Obasanjo, appointed a special commission, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, under Mallam Ribadu. After initial problems, such as new anti-corruption laws that were either too harsh, or too forgiving, Ribadu was able to make some headway in some cases. The most sensational was the prosecution of then Inspector-General of the Nigerian Police Force, arguably his direct superior. He himself was bribed; rather than accept the bribe, he deposited the money in a safe deposit bank, as evidence for later charges. However, he was also criticized for being ‘arbitrary’ in the people he chose to prosecute, seeming to shield certain people politically related to Obasanjo, while aggressively pursuing others. After he was dismissed from his post three weeks prior to the end of Obasanjo’s term as president, Ribadu was reassigned to a ‘training course’. With the end of his official capacity, he was forced to flee Nigeria after assassination attempts against his life failed. In it is a very strong warning; anti-corruption advocates face an uphill battle against the endemic corrup-

tion that pervades Nigeria. While anti-corruption initiatives continue, the EFCC seems to be focusing their activities against ex-officials without legal clout, rather than current officials, to avoid the possible political ramifications of laying charges against very powerful members of the country.

In India, corruption is 'endemic', often to the point where corruption on one hand counteracts corruption on the other. Incredibly, counterfeit money is used to pay bribes to corrupt officials, who discover much to their chagrin that they are holding virtually worthless notes. An anti-corruption group has even taken to printing zero rupee notes for bribes, looking to shame officials who, in local parlance, say 'make Gandhi smile twice', code for a bribe.

However, as of late, the anti-corruption movement has managed to gather steam, the most high-profile movement being that led by Anna Hazare, self-titled as 'Team Anna'. Originally, the 'Lokpal' (ombudsman) bills established ombudsmans offices throughout provinces in India, but restricted them to only investigating minor and lower-ranking individuals, making ministers or even moderately-ranked officials immune to investigation. Mr. Hazare became the centre of a controversy as he launched on a hunger strike to protest that oversight. Millions followed the story, and at the park Mr. Hazare was fasting at, thousands pressed around for a rally in his name, in which the government attempted to arrest him for inciting a civil disturbance. At the end of the fiasco, in the face of increasingly hostile public opinion, the government of India relented, releasing Mr. Hazare, and revising the bill to make even the prime minister subject to investigation by the Lokpal....at least on paper.

Ironically, not even anti-corruption activists are corruption-free. Even within 'Team Anna', his highest-placed aides have been accused of siphoning off funds or mismanagement of expenses, such as inflating travel expenses, and avoiding taxes. And of course, Mr. Hazare is now being criticized (or lauded, depending on who you talk to) for making comments in contradiction to his team member, about the status of Kashmir, even going to say that Kashmir being 'an integral part of India', even to 'willing to fight Pakistan' for it. It seems that anti-corruption is not the only thing on Team Anna's agenda.

The Commonwealth finds that corruption is a serious detriment to the improvement of the standard of living for all Commonwealth citizens. The financial costs of corruption create massive disparities in wealth, drain economies of development capital, and inflate the cost of business. This in turn leads to public lack of confidence and mistrust, especially with foreign investors and aid organizations, and is clearly detrimental to the development and the health of a nation. Due to the urgent need for a solution against corruption, the Commonwealth Secretariat has identified corruption as a key topic to be discussed by the Heads of Government on November 18th to 20st, in Vancouver, BC, Canada.

## SOURCES

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