

CAN AID AGENCIES REALLY HELP COMBAT CORRUPTION?*

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ABSTRACT

Aid agencies help combat corruption in countries with support for "good governance" (referring to elements such as pluralism, judicial reform and anti-corruption agencies); the market economy (demonstrated by practices such as privatization, liberalization and deregulation) and civil society (including civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations and the media). Corruption is viewed as a process of individual "rent-seeking" that can be reduced, even eliminated, by changing incentive structures, including better salaries for officials, enhanced public access to information and more competition for markets and customers. Political corruption, in which public resources are diverted for purposes of patronage and cronyism rather than for personal accumulation, is not a phenomenon aid agencies can address directly without getting embroiled in local politics. Yet if the political dimension of corruption is not addressed, it is difficult to see how the implementation of largely technical solutions to corruption can have a lasting impact. The present article focuses on the nature of corruption facing the aid industry, current steps by aid agencies to deal with corruption and preconditions for a systematic approach to addressing the question of corruption in aid. The main focus is sub-Saharan Africa.

DEFINING CORRUPTION IN AID

There are three possible forms of corruption² in aid: unilateral misuse of funds on the part of the donor; misuse of funds on the part of the

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²Corruption for the purposes of the present article is defined as the misuse of public position for personal and/or political gain.

recipient; and collusion between the two sides. Of those three, the second is the most common. In general, bilateral agencies harbour the least internal corruption. As a rule of thumb, the extent of corruption in donor country politics and the quality of public accountability in national life determine the degree of corruption in bilateral aid. Some donor countries have a unique profile in this context: official financial and political support has helped promote national commercial interest, rather than addressing the needs of recipient countries.³

Lack of transparency and accountability, in particular in the multilateral agencies, the European Union and the United Nations system, present particular obstacles to efforts at corruption control. Over the years, a number of United Nations entities have suffered from cronyism and corruption.⁴ Corruption and cronyism in the European Commission, climaxing in the resignation of the entire Commission, demonstrate how agencies may find it difficult to practise what they preach in their development ideology, namely, good governance, transparency and integrity.

After a devastating report on its lending performance in over 1,500 projects worth 28 billion United States dollars, the Abidjan-based African Development Bank was substantially restructured and its board of directors replaced (Knox 1994).⁵

Aid for emergency relief and humanitarian purposes is particularly vulnerable to corruption. Food aid, too, is open to systematic abuse by officials and the private sector. Given present trends in the incidence of civil disorder and natural catastrophes in Africa, it is likely that such forms of aid will increase in importance in years to come.

CORRUPTION AMONG AID RECIPIENTS⁶

The most common form of corruption with respect to aid is the unilateral misuse of funds by recipients, ranging from widespread petty corruption to grand corruption and looting. As with donors, corruption among aid recipients reflects the degree of transparency and accountability in public affairs. Aid lends itself to the politics of patronage. Patronage, a common feature of politics in Africa, does not necessarily imply corruption. In practice, however, the dividing line is not easily identified. For example, a

³For an analysis of the case of France and "la Francophonie", see Bayart, Ellis and Higon (1999); for an analysis of the case of Italy in the 1980s, see Lancaster (1999).

⁴"Corruption in the United Nations is considered widespread and many of its agencies are, if anything, less open to scrutiny than the [World] Bank" (George and Sabelli (1994, p. 122)).

⁵"The hardest task will be to instil a new culture, which will include fundamental changes in [...] governance" (Knox 1994, p. 34). The African Development Fund of the African Development Bank gives soft loans to the poorest countries of Africa. From 1990 to 1996, the African Development Fund accounted for 8 per cent of all multilateral loans to Africa. The quality of lending was considered extremely poor (Knox cited in Cooksey (1999b)).

⁶Chabal and Daloz (1999) describe how patronage relations have influenced the manner in which aid has been used, and misused, in Africa. Bayart and others (1999) ask to what extent the countries of Africa have been effectively criminalized, rather than simply corrupted, but the role of foreign aid (if any) in the criminalization process is not explored.

senior government official may use influence to have his or her home district chosen as a pilot for a project to co-finance a local education development fund. Such an exercise may be used to strengthen relations with local elites, including politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen, as well as to impress the local population. There may or may not be a concerted effort subsequently to misuse project funds or opportunities. The important point is that aid, in the form of project loans in particular, creates many opportunities for patronage, including project location, hiring project staff, training opportunities, procurement and purchases, and consultancy. In the process, covenants and conditions for loans may be systematically ignored or flaunted.

Furthermore, corruption and patronage should be distinguished from bureaucratic waste, which characterizes much project and other aid. Bureaucratic waste is the use of aid resources for legal but unnecessary or non-productive purposes. For example, projects often involve vehicles and civil works, computers and other office equipment and a battery of training activities, study tours, and workshops or seminars of dubious utility. Technical assistance and consultancy inputs—both of which make up large components of aid—often fall into the latter category. Though analytically distinct, corruption, patronage and bureaucratic waste are usually found together, feeding off and reinforcing one another in a systematic fashion. Patronage, corruption and waste slow down and distort project implementation and help explain the poor performance of most loan-financed projects in countries in Africa (Cooksey 1999b, appendix 1).

The extent of official misuse of aid is not easily assessed since those managing the process are generally protected from public scrutiny. The phenomenal amount of unexplained and irregular government expenditure reported by auditors general of countries in eastern Africa both recurrent and capital budgets, gives an impression of the extent of the problem (Chabal and Daloz 1999, chap. 8). Even where aid money is not directly misappropriated, the conceptual “fungibility” of aid means that any misuse of government revenue implicates aid in proportion to aid’s overall contribution to government revenues. Since aid accounts for about 90 per cent of public investment and 30 per cent of recurrent expenditure in a typical country in sub-Saharan Africa, the implications of the misuse of government spending on aid are substantial.

Most vulnerable to local corruption are loans from the international finance institutions and regional development banks for projects implemented by Governments and sectoral ministries. That is the most crucial area for assessing the impact of corruption in aid, since the international finance institutions account for a growing proportion of total aid flows—and external debt—to Africa. Projects funded by the World Bank are frequently put in place through project implementation units based in central ministries. Such units are staffed by officials who may have to demonstrate allegiance to their hierarchical and political superiors. At the implementation phase, the imperatives of corruption, patronage and bureaucratic waste can easily take over from the formal project objectives, design and management in determining project outcomes.

Beneficiaries from corruption in aid-funded projects include the private contractors and procurement agents, both local and expatriate, who are awarded contracts through suspect tendering arrangements. Contacts from within the system provide intelligence on opportunities. The best-placed businesses are politically well connected and may help fund the ruling party's electoral coffers from income from aid-related contracts. In that way, aid money helps keep ruling the elite in power.⁷ Donor-funded projects, for example, loans to youth groups or women for income generation activities, are routinely manipulated by incumbent or aspiring politicians.⁸

Corruption is found throughout the project cycle. Corruption may be involved in selecting the consultants who appraise, implement, evaluate or review a project and may allow projects to be used for illicit activities during implementation. Procurement contracts may be awarded to relatives and cronies, and project funds earmarked for particular purposes may be directed elsewhere.

The most pernicious form of corruption in aid concerns loans for essentially bogus projects involving collusion between agency and government officials. Agriculture, livestock and irrigation are favourite targets for such projects, though multisectoral projects are also found. That form of corruption takes place in projects that are typically located in remote regions, where the ostensible target group of beneficiaries is unlikely to complain that no benefits are forthcoming. Such projects are by definition impervious to public scrutiny.

Overfunding can encourage corruption by providing more aid than governments can effectively absorb. Sectoral overfunding may reflect a donor tendency to jump into "flavour-of-the-month" activities without considering their combined or aggregate impact. Recent examples include democratization and governance, including anti-corruption initiatives, small-scale credit and support for non-governmental organizations. Competing for relatively small markets forces donors to ignore warning signs of lack of capacity, quality or integrity among recipients.⁹

Joseph Warioba, Chairman of the 1996 Presidential Commission of Enquiry against Corruption of the United Republic of Tanzania, makes a strong case for tracing the source of corruption in aid to the aid agencies themselves (Warioba 1998). Warioba argues that aid to some countries "from bilateral donors and IFIs consists of very large amounts of money and the sum that disappears through corruption is also very large". Warioba singles out aid for infrastructure projects and tied aid, giving the example of a road project funded by a bilateral donor in which the contractor had the support of the local development mission, despite its poor

⁷Competitive politics, by reducing the job security of incumbent politicians, has arguably increased the vulnerability of aid to such corruption in recent years.

⁸Since such projects often contain a participatory component, some of the costs involved are borne by the intended beneficiaries.

⁹Despite growing support for the private sector and civil society organizations, central government is still the major beneficiary of overfunding.

performance. The pervasiveness of aid means that any corruption related to implementing particular government policies usually involves aid money. Warioba relates examples of corruption in the privatization process and in contracting a dubious foreign firm to collect debts from a defunct government bank. The debts collected were less than the fees received.

THE AID INDUSTRY'S RESPONSE TO THE CORRUPTION CHALLENGE

Having identified corruption, albeit belatedly, as a basic constraint on economic growth and social development, the aid industry has proceeded to sponsor a wide range of activities promoting improved state and private sector governance. Most Governments of countries in Africa are implementing donor-funded governance programmes covering anti-corruption, democratization, rule of law and support for civil society, including non-governmental organizations. Economic reforms are intended to level the economic playing field, eliminate unnecessary regulation and encourage investment and growth.

In addition, despite the recent rhetoric of partnership, all major donors still attach formal conditionalities to their aid, including respect for human rights, anti-corruption measures, gender equality, protection of the environment, democratization and liberalization. Such conditionalities are intended to send the message to governments receiving aid that they need to change their ways in order to qualify for further development assistance.¹⁰ Conditionalities have rarely been effective in forcing compliance to structural adjustment policies (Panday 2000). Leaders of some countries in Africa have been known to swallow their pride, take the aid and proceed more or less as usual, lacking either the will or the capacity (or both) to implement agreed policies. Chabal and Daloz (1999) suggest that "donors ... seem on the whole to have accepted a degree of non-compliance with the stated aims of aid and a level of failure of targeted aid projects which beggar belief. ... African ruling elites were able to use foreign aid primarily as an additional source of clientelistic revenue."

The "disbursement culture" of the "[World] Bank makes it difficult to place anti-corruption concerns into the mainstream in projects funded by the World Bank. External audits routinely fail to pick up or follow up evidence of corruption. One report on Uganda found that "[World] Bank employees have complained that projects are indifferently audited, or, even where audits reveal diversions, that there are no substantial consequences for diversion because the internal institutional incentives of the Bank spur lending." (Thomas and Barkan 1998, p. 27).¹¹ Project supervi-

¹⁰Wolfensohn (1999) warns Governments in developing countries that they will jeopardize their foreign assistance and investment by condoning corruption.

¹¹Uganda is one of the few countries where corruption in projects funded by the World Bank has been both publicized and acted upon locally in the absence of external pressure.

sory functions of the World Bank are often inadequate to reveal or follow up effectively on instances of corruption, for example, in procurement.¹²

To be fair, the World Bank and other donors are often actively involved in challenging acts of bad governance, including corruption, among aid recipients. In extreme circumstances, aid donors may cancel projects or entire programmes for the same reasons. Though aid recipients obviously resent interference in local politics, donors are sometimes the principal source of critical opposition to instances of grand corruption.¹³ At the same time, donors are often reluctant to "blow the whistle" on corruption, even where it undermines their own programmes. Some donors may deny well-founded reports of major misuse of resources in activities that they fund, even when they are not directly implicated in any wrong-doing.

Since the International Monetary Fund does not lend money for projects, its concern with the impact of corruption on its lending programmes remains at a more general level. After much criticism of its willingness to fund corrupt regimes in the past, there are signs that the International Monetary Fund, like the World Bank, is beginning to take corruption more seriously. Kenya, where an Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility loan was suspended in 1997, is a case in point.¹⁴

Whether combating corruption should be used by aid agencies as a conditionality is a complex issue, further complicated by current initiatives, known as the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Debt Initiatives, that link debt relief to transparent and externally monitored poverty reduction programmes by the beneficiaries of debt relief. For the moment, the actual amounts of relief forthcoming under such a debt initiative are so small that they hardly constitute a major material incentive to relief-seeking governments (Mutume 2001, p. 26). The issue of writing off "odious debts" resulting from previous badly designed and implemented projects has been peripheral to the debt initiative debate, which has focused on the past failures of the borrowers, not the lenders.

Furthermore, aid agencies have started to improve their own practices, including better staff supervision and stricter rules and penalties. In the late 1990s, the World Bank began to publish the names of procurement companies and contractors involved in malpractice, banning them from further bidding on projects financed by the World Bank. Enhanced internal controls have also unearthed maverick staff. According to Singh (1998, p. 8), "it is generally accepted that [such measures] are beginning to have a significant deterrent effect in curbing corruption in [...] operations" financed by the World Bank.¹⁵

¹²According to Singh (1998, p. 5), World Bank audits of procurement tend to focus excessively on processes: much more needs to be done on the quality of the physical work undertaken, by independent consultants where the World Bank lacks the technical staff required. This could have a large immediate impact on reducing the losses of corrupt and fraudulent practices.

¹³As a result of aid dependency, donors feel they have a responsibility to oppose instances of grand corruption unless, of course, they are involved themselves.

¹⁴However, many including bilateral donors, find the International Monetary Fund's subsequent keenness to recommence lending to Kenya too hasty (Githongo 2000).

¹⁵This seems optimistic.

In many cases, anti-corruption exercises have led to mistrust, low morale among staff, the possibility of the development of other forms of corruption, unnecessary bureaucracy and new avoidance mechanisms. Anechiarico (1999) describes how anti-corruption initiatives have failed in public administration in the United States of America.¹⁶

The zero tolerance option adopted by the World Bank has had all those predictable effects. Competitive bidding has been used for contracts worth just a few thousand dollars. Donors introduce procedures in order to remove the least suspicion of malpractice, succeeding in slowing down project implementation and frustrating the honest actors along with the rest. Existing onerous bureaucratic procedures become even more onerous. The costs involved in appearing squeaky clean are not counted, since aid is not organized around principles of efficiency or competition. Both aid workers and recipients resent the assumption that they are guilty until proven innocent.

The "islands of integrity" approach championed by the Global Coalition for Africa and Transparency International, which aims to clean up on procurement and tendering in major projects, addresses a very real and urgent issue. That worthwhile initiative¹⁷ must be linked to a more general view of aid-related corruption along the lines described in the present article. That would allow the inclusion of projects and non-project loans where international procurement is not a central feature.

SOME OPTIONS FOR TRACKING CORRUPTION IN AID

Before anything can be done to address corruption in aid, the problem needs to be fully defined. For that to happen, corruption must be conceptualized in systemic rather than individualistic terms. It is also important to try to delineate the relationship between corruption as a factor undermining aid and other factors working in the same direction. In practice, the proposition is problematic since so many factors are involved.

For both aid agencies and recipients, addressing corruption in aid requires evidence of the nature and scope of the problem, a broad commitment to solve it and a strategy to address it. Aid agencies need to realize that their own long-term legitimacy and (perhaps) survival require a radical revision in their mode of operation. That means exposing their own integrity systems to the same rigours of transparency and accountability as are expected from their development partners.

To help mainstream anti-corruption initiatives, moral leadership should be sought from within the donor community,¹⁸ the major foundations and

¹⁶Zero tolerance is the approach of the Government of the United States to drug trafficking. Yet half the corruption cases brought against police officers between 1993 and 1997 were drug-related. Escalating public spending over 20 years coincides with a significant improvement in the quality and fall in the price of drugs (Drug Policy Alliance 2000).

¹⁷"Islands of Integrity" or no bribery pledges are not viewed favourably by many World Bank procurement experts.

¹⁸The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (known as NORAD) has taken such a lead, with support from a number of bilateral agencies. The real problem, however, lies with the multilaterals.

non-governmental organizations that focus on development issues, the research and consultancy industries, the private sector, associations of aid workers and political parties.

Compiling an annual donor corruption index to complement the corruption perception index and bribery perception index as developed by Transparency International would be a promising measure (Fjeldstad 1999). The corruption perception index has had a dramatic impact on public discussions of corruption. The criticism that it is unfair in concentrating on the bribe-takers has now been addressed by ranking bribe-givers. In the same way, an aid corruption index would rank both recipient countries and agencies on their propensity to corruption. The question that remains, however, is who would compile such an index and defend its findings.

The pressures on academic and research organizations to earn their keep from contractual work allows donors to define research and consultancy priorities in ways that primarily serve their own interests. Academics from countries in Africa suffer from the same constraints.¹⁹ Establishing a standing committee in the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development to monitor corruption in aid, for example, would be a useful measure. The committee would refer grievous cases of corruption in aid agencies to international legal process and adjudication, with appropriate sanctions.

There is often opposition from Governments of countries in Africa to attempts to raise the issue of corruption in aid, including aid-funded projects. Outside South Africa, the number of non-governmental organizations from Africa and grass-roots community-based organizations with the capacity to take up the issue of aid transparency is limited. The national chapters of Transparency International could take up the issue of corruption in aid should they be convinced that the issue merits their attention. The difficulty is that Transparency International chapters rely on donors for their core funding and other activities; thus, there might be reluctance to bite the hand that feeds them.

The preventive measures that may be of value are:

- ❑ All proposed aid projects above a certain value, and all programmes, should be the subject of public discussion, including wide review by parliament, the business community and civil society organizations of all kinds;
- ❑ Public expenditure reviews should include greater disclosure of aid inputs and the rationale for public investment choices;
- ❑ Regular publication of details of donor-funded projects and public access to data on aid and debt.

¹⁹Failure to raise the corruption issue weakens otherwise authoritative writing on aid to Africa. For example, van de Walle and Johnston (1996, p. 76) devote one sentence to corruption whereas Riley (1998), writing on the political economy of anti-corruption strategies in Africa, including reference to the World Bank, fails to consider aid as a potential incentive to corruption. In a major study of aid to Africa, Lancaster (1999) devotes only three pages to corruption in Governments of countries in Africa, but discusses how aid from Italy to countries in Africa in the 1980s was undermined by corruption.

Research on corruption in aid can be included in integrity system and service delivery surveys. Such surveys document public opinion and the experience of corruption, including the impact of the latter on the availability, cost and quality of public services. Such surveys are already part of the battery of public service reform tools aimed at improving the performance of central and local governments. National integrity system research could include the issue of corruption in aid and constitute a possible source of the above-mentioned donor corruption index.

From the public's perspective, civil society and the private sector need to be involved in carrying out the surveys, whereas governments and donors see them as part of civil service reform, and therefore under government control. Surveys that investigate service quality and the role of aid, but are controlled by central or local government, are unlikely to be carried out objectively, since the real picture would predictably show up the poor performance of both governments and donors. It is also unlikely that donors would get away with funding independent and potentially shocking research for very long. Finding credible local researchers prepared to risk the consequences of being involved in such activities is problematic, for the reasons discussed above. The involvement of outside researchers and consultants could lead to the research being branded as a foreign plot designed to discredit the government.

For some time, the World Bank has been sponsoring workshops on investigative journalism²⁰ national integrity and other anti-corruption activities. A round of workshops on investigative journalism could be run on the theme of corruption in aid. Corruption in aid should figure in integrity workshops. There would be major risks to investigative journalists, editors and newspaper editors. "Whistle-blowers" also risk their lives if they start telling the truth about certain types of aid.

The following measures may be effective:

- ❑ Establishment of parliamentary committees empowered to review aid performance with powers to question senior officials on aid-funded projects and programmes (sessions should be held in public);
- ❑ Unannounced value for money audits of any loan-funded project by an official auditor or consultants;
- ❑ Systematic assessments of the impact on the environment, the economy and poverty levels of aid programmes and projects in all sectors.

The last two measures are information-empowerment measures, giving all stakeholders the means to take an intelligent position on the impact of aid.

²⁰Critics claim the constraints on investigative journalism in Africa—low salaries, threats to journalists and editors from repressive governments, self-censorship by media owners—undermine the usefulness of such training.

CONCLUSION

The mechanisms for identifying and dealing with corruption in aid-recipient relations are not difficult to identify. What appears to be currently lacking is the will to assimilate the lessons of the past in order to introduce reforms on the part of donors. That poses particular challenges for the international financial institutions. Given the unique position of the World Bank in defining the terms of the development debate, including corruption, it is worth asking whether a more fundamental critique of corruption can be invoked in the interest of good sense and in the search for practical solutions.²¹

The aid industry, led by the World Bank, tends to define corruption found in some countries in Africa as a local issue that can be addressed by supporting diverse initiatives of a largely technical nature. It is also assumed that corruption is a largely individual process of rent-seeking that can be addressed by changing incentive structures, including wages, accountability and competition.

Thus, if corruption were to be viewed as a systemic political phenomenon, derived from complex patronage structures, aid agencies would have to ask who their local anti-corruption allies might be in any given context. It is not enough for a head of state to adopt a formally anti-corruption stance: that may be done just to placate donors. If aid agencies and their local partners have diametrically different definitions of the situation, it is difficult to see how the implementation of largely technical solutions to corruption can have a lasting impact.

It is a common, though unjustified, criticism of aid to countries in Africa that it has had no impact despite large transfers over a protracted period. The impact of aid has grown in direct proportion to the rise of aid dependency. Corruption as rent-seeking and political patronage have been major contributors to personal accumulation among ruling elites and political strategies to protect or advance their collective interests. The story of the major role played by aid in those two processes has yet to be written.

Finally, as to whether aid agencies really contribute to the fight against corruption (the question posed in the title of the present article), the short answer is no. Some agencies lack transparency and accountability in their own operations. Their anti-corruption policies should be judged accordingly. Furthermore, the degree of tolerance among some agencies for the misuse of donor funds by recipient governments is unacceptable. It is easy to conclude that the donors' propensity to overlook corruption is directly proportionate to their need to lend or grant money. In that sense, there is a virtual conspiracy of silence between aid givers and takers that defines the aid relationship. Ending such a conspiracy would be a precondition for aid agencies to develop a comparative advantage in confronting corruption.

²¹The omens are not good. For example, the Wapenhams Report (1992) led the World Bank to assert that "only sound, on-the-ground results—the development impact of projects—are true measures of the Bank's contribution to sustainable development", quoted by George and Sabelli (1994, pp. 225-226). Consequently, the World Bank initiated a process for assessing the impact of social sector loans, covering only 13 per cent of World Bank lending.

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