



U4 Brief 2018:2

# Corruption and the city

How aid donors can support integrity  
building in urban spaces

By Aled Williams and Kendra Dupuy

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**Keywords**

aid - anti-corruption measures - cities - public financial management - public sector

**Publication type**

U4 Brief

More than half of the world's population live in urban areas. The policies and practices of municipal governments are therefore an integral determinant of the extent to which the Sustainable Development Goals are achieved. Yet poor governance and rampant corruption undermine such efforts. Cities across the world are introducing urban governance initiatives intended to reduce corruption. To maximise the effect of these programmes, we need additional research. The limited evidence that exists suggests that access-to-information, transparency, and citizen engagement can help curb urban corruption.

## Main points

- Corruption is undermining cities' efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Its effects range from increasing socio-economic inequality to harming the environment.
- City-focused corruption research is needed to inform emerging policy and practice.
- Making information on municipal public finances available to citizens can help reduce knowledge gaps.
- Improving the transparency of municipal public service provision could prevent forms of corruption linked to city services.
- Strengthening citizen engagement in city management may be part of the solution.
- Donors should review their portfolios to consider which urban initiatives could benefit from an enhanced anti-corruption effectiveness lens.

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The share of the global population living in urban areas is projected to increase by around 70% by 2050 (Zinnbauer 2017<sup>1</sup>). Urbanisation combined with population growth could add another 2.5 billion people to urban populations by 2050, with close to 90% of the increase concentrated in Asia and Africa (UNDESA 2014<sup>2</sup>). Indeed, cities in developing countries are expected to triple in size by 2030 as compared to the year 2000 (Angel et al 2001<sup>3</sup>). Urban governance in developing country cities will therefore need to be a major element in efforts to realise the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 11<sup>4</sup> to make “cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.”

Many urban governance challenges have connections to forms of corruption. Examples include ineffective waste management systems in urban Bangladesh (Bhuiyan 2009<sup>5</sup>), chaotic real-estate development in Chinese cities (Cai et al 2009<sup>6</sup>), and persistent organised crime in districts of Johannesburg (Leggett 2002<sup>7</sup>). There is a growing body of such empirical cases. The centrality of urban governance in helping meet future development objectives is also recognised. However, there are no systematic studies of corruption in developing country cities. Indeed, analyses of urban spaces have in general been slow to develop a comparative agenda (Pierre 2005<sup>8</sup>). The difficulties are sometimes attributed to analysts’ over-reliance on ideal-typical models of urban development (Myers and Murray 2007<sup>9</sup>, Robinson 2006<sup>10</sup>).

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1. <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781785361197.00021.xml>
  2. <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/2014-revision-world-urbanization-prospects.html>
  3. [https://www.lincolnst.edu/sites/default/files/pubfiles/making-room-for-a-planet-of-cities-full\\_0.pdf](https://www.lincolnst.edu/sites/default/files/pubfiles/making-room-for-a-planet-of-cities-full_0.pdf)
  4. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities/>
  5. [http://www.academia.edu/7566644/A\\_crisis\\_in\\_governance\\_Urban\\_solid\\_waste\\_management\\_in\\_Bangladesh](http://www.academia.edu/7566644/A_crisis_in_governance_Urban_solid_waste_management_in_Bangladesh)
  6. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w15067>
  7. <https://issafrica.org/01-nov-2002-sacq-no-2/a-den-of-iniquity>
  8. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240710603\\_Comparative\\_Urban\\_Governance\\_Uncovering\\_Complex\\_Causalities](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240710603_Comparative_Urban_Governance_Uncovering_Complex_Causalities)
  9. <http://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781403970350>
  10. <https://www.routledge.com/Ordinary-Cities-Between-Modernity-and-Development/Robinson/p/book/9780415304887>

# Down-and-out from Cairo to Kampala: Corruption challenges in urban governance

A recent media article reflecting on “which are the most corrupt cities in the world?” suggests that all methodologies to measure urban corruption have their limitations (Schenker 2016<sup>11</sup>). This seems true of efforts to measure corruption at a variety of scales. This U4 Brief therefore focuses on commonly reported challenges facilitated by forms of corruption in urban settings. Our review of 64 published journal articles shows clustering of corruption issues around four main challenges, described below.<sup>12</sup> This does not necessarily imply that corruption is more of a problem in relation to these challenges than in other aspects of urban governance. It could simply reflect researcher preferences.

## **Enhancing socio-economic inequality**

Corruption enhances injustices such as inequality, weak political inclusiveness and a lack of participation. Dubious sales of desert land on Cairo’s fringes, for example, didn't just result in kickbacks to officials. Public resources such as drinking water, energy pipelines and transport infrastructure were diverted to areas with few inhabitants (Schenker 2016). The result has been the skewing of parameters for urban development for years to come.<sup>13</sup>

Assessing the spread of luxury urban enclaves in Mumbai, Wissink (2013<sup>14</sup>) argues corruption is part of a range of urban characteristics shaping local enclaves in the city. Although he warns against oversimplified narratives, Wissink’s detailed account shows how the existing urban landscape and its objects, the structure of the Indian state, land regulations and the presence of the mafia interact with corruption to produce highly unequal urban housing.

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11. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jun/21/which-most-corrupt-cities-in-world>

12. Our review used a keyword-focused coding matrix and searches in BIBSYS (the Norwegian library system) and Google Scholar.

13. Auctions of desert land in Egypt for new city development accounted for 10% of total national government revenue in 2007 (Peterson 2009).

14. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235941565\\_Enclave\\_urbanism\\_in\\_Mumbai\\_An\\_actor-network-analysis\\_of\\_urban\\_disconnection](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235941565_Enclave_urbanism_in_Mumbai_An_actor-network-analysis_of_urban_disconnection)

## Weakening urban environmental management

Corruption also generates environmental management challenges in cities. In Mexico City, for example, bribery is cheaper than car maintenance as a means to “pass” emissions tests. Preventing such cheating could eliminate 1,443 tons of emissions each year (Oliva 2012<sup>15</sup>). In Kampala, corruption and a lack of transparency have resulted in serious inefficiencies in solid waste management operations (Kutusiimeh et al 2012<sup>16</sup>). Similarly, in Mumbai low-income communities face basic challenges of hydration and washing that often involve “the negotiation of complex circuits of predation, corruption, and patronage” (Graham et al 2013<sup>17</sup>).

## Increasing urban vulnerability to disasters

Catastrophic events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Japan’s 2013 Fukushima nuclear disaster, and West Africa’s 2014 Ebola outbreak highlight cities' vulnerability to disasters, epidemics and infrastructural breakdowns (Zaiderman 2017<sup>18</sup>, Lieberman 2016<sup>19</sup>). Resilience efforts can reduce the impact of future disasters. However, corruption is undermining such efforts throughout developing country cities. Malalgoda et al (2014<sup>20</sup>), for example, document how corruption linked to poor planning and regulation, unauthorised structures and inadequate municipal management presents major impediments to creating disaster resilience in Sri Lankan cities. Similarly, Ambraseys and Bilham (2011<sup>21</sup>) found that 85% of earthquake-induced building collapses take place in countries that are highly corrupt.

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15. [http://econ.ucsb.edu/~oliva/Docs/Smog\\_Checks\\_Jan2012.pdf](http://econ.ucsb.edu/~oliva/Docs/Smog_Checks_Jan2012.pdf)

16. <http://www.academia.edu/13328535/>

The\_operations\_and\_effectiveness\_of\_public\_and\_private\_provision\_of\_solid\_waste\_collection\_services\_in\_Kampala

17. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273100427\\_Water\\_Wars\\_in\\_Mumbai](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273100427_Water_Wars_in_Mumbai)

18. <https://lsecities.net/publications/reports/urban-uncertainty/>

19. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/may/20/global-alliance-urban-crises-disaster-response-ebola-humanitarian>

20. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212567114009976>

21. <http://www.nature.com/articles/469153a>

## **Undermining anti-organised crime efforts in urban areas**

Organised crime is a strong feature in many urban environments. Law enforcement measures to tackle the problem proliferate. However, corruption – particularly within municipal police and law enforcement agencies – can undermine anti-organised crime efforts. A crime survey focused on residential hotels in Johannesburg’s Hillbrow district, for example, found that most residents did not feel police efforts to reduce crime were effective (Leggett 2002). Some respondents also reported having directly experienced the corruption they believed led to police failures. A more recent survey of 400 residents in Lahore focused on direct and indirect experience of police corruption and perceptions of police effectiveness and legitimacy. This survey showed relatively widespread experience of police corruption (Jackson et al 2014<sup>22</sup>). The same survey also found that only a small proportion of respondents agreed that the police were well-trained to pursue criminals or did well at controlling violent crime.

## **Cities on-the-up: Examples of supposed renaissance in urban governance**

Although we found no published, systematic studies of forms of corruption in developing country cities, surveys and single-case or comparative studies touching on issues of urban corruption do exist (e.g. Zaiderman 2017). These studies offer insights into examples of supposed urban governance renaissance, but also show that such transformations are usually more complex than often popularly portrayed (e.g. Schenker 2016), with both positive and negative trends co-existing. Below, we highlight two examples of supposed urban governance renaissance from the literature.

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22. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2421036](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2421036)

### **Medellín’s urban governance “miracle” in national context**

The transformation of Medellín, Colombia’s second city and home to notorious *narcotraficante* Pablo Escobar, has been touted as an example of a concerted fightback against urban corruption (Schenker 2016). Indeed, according to Zeiderman (2017) the larger Colombian cities have garnered considerable praise as mayors and architects have sought to overturn their reputation for urban dystopia. One project considered integral to Medellín’s transformation is *Metrocable*: a city transportation system also popularly described as a “symbol of intent” for the city’s future governance (The Economist 2014<sup>23</sup>). Positive readings of Colombian urban transformation should not, however, be viewed as entirely benign. Zeiderman (2017) points out that the often much grimmer realities of daily life in smaller cities – which together contain the majority of Colombia’s 30 million urban inhabitants – can be obscured by success stories from metropolitan centres. Zeiderman (2017) offers the example of the port city Buenaventura to underline why it is necessary to look beyond “packaged success stories” when considering appropriate responses to urban challenges. The government plans to develop the low-lying settlement known as Bajamar into a world-class port facility, to both encourage trade with Asia and improve the area’s resilience to climate change. Yet, these proposals are contested by Bajamar residents, who urge alternatives to port expansion and resettlement. They argue that the area is already highly adapted to unpredictable climate changes and that architectural, engineering and ecological interventions could make it even more so.

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23. <https://www.economist.com/news/americas/21603432-transformation-colombias-second-city-will-be-hard-copy-trouble-miracles>

## **Bucharest: Civic beacon or den of iniquity?**

September 2015 saw the arrest of the mayor of the Romanian capital Bucharest, charged with taking kickbacks from companies awarded contracts with the city (BBC News 2015<sup>24</sup>). According to public prosecutors, firms that won public works contracts kept up to 33% of the gross profit. The mayor is one of several high-profile officials that have recently lost their jobs due to corruption allegations. In response to anti-government demonstrations, the government has also promised a referendum on fighting official corruption (French 2017<sup>25</sup>).

Visible progress in anti-corruption prosecutions since the fall of communism has won the country and capital praise both at home and abroad (Gillet 2017<sup>26</sup>). Indeed, Bucharest's anti-corruption campaign and particularly the efforts of the country's anti-corruption head, Laura Kövesi, are popularly described as an example of a "civic beacon" (Schenker 2016). Kövesi has herself been made a knight of the French Legion of Honour for her efforts. The need for this work appears to remain strong, however, with Sampson (2015<sup>27</sup>) arguing that networks of nepotism, cronyism and clientelism are still firmly entrenched in cities such as Bucharest.

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24. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-3416889>

25. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/13/romania-approves-anti-corruption-referendum><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/13/romania-approves-anti-corruption-referendum>

26. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/12/romania-corruption-chief-prosecutor-laura-codruta-kovesi--steely-vigilance>

27. <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/anti-corruption-package>

# Improving urban governance: How can donors help address city corruption?

A nascent anti-corruption agenda for cities has recently emerged as part of high-level policy dialogues and frameworks. The 2014 World Urban Forum in Medellín discussed the role of cities in addressing corruption. Participants shared innovative strategies, good practices and diagnostic methods for tackling corruption in urban spaces. At the 2015 International Anti-Corruption Conference in Kuala Lumpur, the mayors of Monrovia and Abra de Ilog reflected on practical anti-corruption experiences in their respective cities (Zinnbauer 2016<sup>28</sup>). The 2016 Habitat III Summit in Quito led to the inclusion of anti-corruption language in its resolution that was later adopted by the UN General Assembly. It focused particularly on support to subnational and local governments in preventative anti-corruption measures (UN General Assembly 2017<sup>29</sup>). And, in February 2017, a workshop of the Uraia Platform, a partnership between UN Habitat and FMDV (the Global Fund for the development of cities), focused on innovative solutions for municipal management and finance. Such solutions included citizen engagement against corruption and increasing local capacities for anti-corruption work (Uraia 2017<sup>30</sup>).

*A nascent anti-corruption agenda for cities has emerged as part of high-level policy dialogues and frameworks.*

Below, we reflect on four ways that donors can work to improve urban governance and address city corruption, drawing on information shared via the above practitioner-centred initiatives.

## **1. Support the collection, analysis, systematisation and dissemination of data on practices in urban governance**

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28. <http://hln.org/activitydetails.php?id=pHBoag==#.WmiDJUxFxPY>

29. [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_71\\_256.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_71_256.pdf)

30. <https://www.oidp.net/docs/repo/doc209.pdf>

As the examples of supposed urban renaissance above show, potential good practices should not be taken at face value. Serious reflection about the conditions under which they work is required. Donors can further encourage the collection, analysis, systematisation and eventual dissemination of data on practices in urban governance. They can also contribute to improved quality control in good practice identification. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), for example, has run surveys on the degree of digital development in municipal governments, creating a composite index that systematises good practices by category. Still, the IDB recognises the need to develop more structured mechanisms and selection methodologies to identify municipalities that have shown systemic improvements (Uraia 2017).

## **2. Support improved access-to-information and transparency for municipal public finances**

The effects of access-to-information and transparency measures on corruption need closer examination. However, there is evidence that improving public financial management regimes can help address corruption as part of a package of reforms (Johnsøn et al 2012<sup>31</sup>). Making information on municipal public finances available to citizens as one element of a public financial management intervention may reduce knowledge gaps between city dwellers and authorities. An example of a city-wide public financial management platform aimed at encouraging transparent municipal finance data is Nicosia's online portal. The portal gives citizens access to information about property charges, planning licenses, garbage collection charges and fines (Uraia 2017). It should be noted, though, that improving citizen knowledge of municipal finances may be insufficient to encourage accountability should corruption be revealed.

## **3. Support improved transparency around municipal public service provision**

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31. <https://www.u4.no/publications/mapping-evidence-gaps-in-anti-corruption-assessing-the-state-of-the-operationally-relevant-evidence-on-donors-actions-and-approaches-to-reducing-corruption/>

Improving the transparency of municipal public service provision is a possible means to circumvent forms of corruption linked to city services. The city council of Petaling Jaya (Malaysia) has, for example, attempted to improve the efficiency of municipal services by sharing work schedules and reports via WhatsApp with citizens, local officials and contractors (Uraia 2017). The service has however encountered challenges, including ethical and compliance issues. It is also fairly basic, and is limited to information communication. More generally, there is evidence to suggest that the effectiveness of e-tools in reducing corruption in public service delivery is dependent on the oversight and accountability regimes within which they operate (Baniamin 2015<sup>32</sup>). Still, they can potentially help reduce the vulnerability of public services to corrupt ‘gatekeepers’ by removing them from frontline roles.

*E-tools can help reduce the vulnerability of public services to corrupt ‘gatekeepers’ by removing them from frontline roles.*

#### **4. Support improved citizen engagement in city management**

Demonstrations of public dissatisfaction with bad city management and corruption can be viewed as evidence that citizens wish to become part of the solution. Donor interventions could therefore focus on means to strengthen citizen engagement in city management. An example from Bogota is the Lab Capital<sup>33</sup>. This innovation lab provides the city administration with ideas, methodologies, tools and good practices to affect the cycle of public policies, taking the voices of citizens into account. The project is based on the idea that public sectors and the sphere of citizens are not entirely separate. Citizens and public servants can co-create and monitor the cycle of public policies (Uraia 2017). The question of how such projects translate into (or are even feasible in) authoritarian or semi-authoritarian environments remains, however.

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32. <http://www.u4.no/publications/controlling-corruption-through-e-governance-case-evidence-from-bangladesh/>

33. <http://veeduridistrital.gov.co/noticias/LAB-Capital-Al-servicio-la-ciudadan%C3%ADa-y-Distrito>

## Way forward: More research combined with enhanced focus

Cities around the world are introducing urban governance initiatives at least partly intended to reduce forms of corruption (Uraia 2017). Many of these initiatives draw on years of practitioner experience and could yield important results. Yet, we find that there is a lack of serious systematic studies specifically on forms of city corruption and on the effectiveness of anti-corruption approaches in developing country urban spaces. As such, city-based anti-corruption initiatives could potentially repeat the challenges of limited effectiveness suffered by national anti-corruption interventions over recent years. General urban governance interventions could also fail to address city-specific corruption issues.

A city-focused corruption research agenda is needed to complement, reflect on, and inform emerging policy and practice initiatives. Such a focus could usefully develop a comparative urban studies approach to forms of corruption in developing country cities. It could also help build an evidence base for understanding the effectiveness of urban governance interventions in addressing corrupt practices. In the meantime, interested donors should look critically at their portfolios to consider which urban initiatives could benefit from an enhanced anti-corruption effectiveness lens.

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