

U4 Expert Answer



How to reduce levels of corruption at country level: Lessons learned

Query

Are there any countries that have demonstrated significant reductions in corruption over time? If so, what factors have been important to allow this to happen? Are there examples of countries that have managed to reduce corruption without obvious political leadership, using a bottom-up, society-driven approach?

Purpose

To think about how to drive reform in countries where leadership is absent.

based and relatively efficient judiciary and public services, as well as transparency and participation in policy formulation and public spending.

Content

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Estonia's good anti-corruption performance is largely attributed to its political leadership in a post-Soviet era context. They undertook a radical reform of the judiciary and public administration, managed a relatively clean and rapid privatisation process and created transparency through e-government and access to information law.

Summary

Modern examples of countries that have succeeded in reducing corruption are few and disputed. Botswana, Estonia and South Korea are often mentioned as good performers, especially in their regional context.

In South Korea, civil service reform and the introduction of e-government and access to information proved very successful. Korean civil society played a major role in the country's anti-corruption progress by exerting pressure on the government. It initiated many transparency and anti-corruption legislations and programmes and acted as a watch-dog.

In Botswana, the political leadership's sustained commitment to fight corruption played a major role, as well as the country's anti-corruption agency. Other factors include autonomous, merit-

Those examples confirm that political leadership and a commitment to fight corruption at the highest levels appear to be a pre-requisite to achieve reducing corruption. But pressure from

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civil society and citizens on political leaders can be a major driver to generate political will to address corruption, as was demonstrated in South Korea.

Introduction

One way to identify the factors that allow a country to significantly reduce its levels of corruption is to study countries that have achieved substantive reduction in levels of corruption in the past. Countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Great Britain, France and the US have achieved a significant control of corruption in the 19th and early 20th century. Since then, examples of countries that have succeeded in tackling corruption are few and disputed.

1. Examples of countries that have reduced corruption in recent times

Qatar and **Rwanda** are often cited as anti-corruption achievers because of their improvement in ranking in governance indexes, but some country experts are seriously questioning these achievements (Bozzini 2014; Khatib 2014).

There is a consensus around the cases of **Singapore** and **Hong Kong**, and they have been extensively studied by development professionals and academics. (The case of Hong Kong is developed in the appendix of a Helpdesk answer that can be found [here](#)).

Georgia is generally considered a “borderline” case because it still ranks quite low in terms of control of corruption, but it stands out compared to the other countries in the region. It has been labelled by the World Bank as the country that has made the greatest progress in controlling corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Indeed, following the 2004 “rose revolution”, the new government launched high profile anti-corruption campaigns and undertook large scale reforms, especially of the police and the public sector. As a result, petty bribery was successfully reduced in a short period of time and trust in the government restored. However, the country has so far failed to effectively address high-level corruption (Chêne 2011; Urushadze 2013).

The case of **Liberia** illustrates the pro-active – and somewhat debated – role the international community can play in promoting anti-corruption reform in a post-war setting. While Liberia still

performs significantly below world and regional averages in many areas of governance, tremendous progress have been made since 2006 under the leadership of President Johnson-Sirleaf and with the pro-active support of the international community and civil society through the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (Chêne 2011; 2012).

A previous U4 Expert Answer reviews the anti-corruption progress in Georgia, Liberia and Rwanda in more detail and can be access [here](#).

Some countries like Chile or Uruguay have made progress in the fight against corruption over a long period of time. More recent examples of “modern achievers” include Botswana, Estonia and South Korea which are reviewed in more detail below (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015).

Anti-corruption progress in Botswana

Botswana is perceived to be the least corrupt country in sub-Saharan Africa, according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI). In 2014, Botswana scored 63 on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean), which places it at 31 of 174 countries. The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) also show a good performance in terms of control of corruption, with a score of 76% on a range from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest) rank (Transparency International 2014; Kaufmann et al. 2014).

Petty and bureaucratic corruption appear to be quite rare with only 1% of public services users declaring they paid a bribe in the past 12 months. However, 51% of the population think that corruption has increased over the past year. Nevertheless, confidence in the current government to fight corruption in government remains rather high, with 54% believing it is doing well in that regard (Pring 2015).

The country is often presented as a classic anti-corruption success. Botswana has had low levels of corruption since its first assessment by the World Bank in 1996, and there is no evidence that corruption was much worse before that. It is thus difficult to assess Botswana’s *progress* in the matter. However, it started as one of the poorest countries in the world when it gained independence from the UK in 1966, became the largest producer of diamonds in the world but did not fall into the “resource curse” as so many other resource-rich developing countries did (Ross

2014). Therefore, compared to countries with similar conditions, such as its neighbours Zimbabwe or Zambia, its control of corruption is significantly stronger (Badham-Jones 2014; Mungiu-Pippdi 2015). The next sections will examine some of the key factors behind this success.

Political leadership

Botswana's path to control of corruption started under the leadership of Seretse Khama, its first president (1966 to 1980), who took a tough stance against corruption that was emulated by his successors. This stance against corruption was rooted in a clear vision for Botswana as a nation at independence. The leadership was committed to set the norm for the future and focused on public interests and nation building, ultimately leading to impressive actions to break away from harmful patterns and institutions (Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2003.). Like in other countries, Botswana's political leaders were not totally exempt from corruption, but they have been praised for their rapid and decisive reaction to uncovered scandals and their credible commitment to a zero tolerance policy towards corruption (Iltner 2009).

Festus Mogae, Botswana's president from 1998 to 2008, declared that, for anti-corruption campaigns to be successful, "the government of the day must be prepared to risk potential embarrassment to itself" and "any anti-corruption campaign which seeks to provide immunity to any group of individuals is bound to fail because it will lack that element so essential to its success, namely public confidence and support" (Mogae 1999).

The anti-corruption agency

Botswana's success in controlling corruption is also attributed to its anti-corruption agency, even though some suggest that its role might be overrated as other factors – such as the ones mentioned further below – played an important role (Mungiu-Pippdi 2015).

The Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime (DCEC) was established in 1994, following high-level corruption scandals uncovered by the media in the early 1990s. It was created using the model of Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). The DCEC is globally recognised for its innovative preventive and educational efforts. It also has strong investigative powers and successfully brought numerous cases to justice (Kuris 2013).

However, unlike the ICAC, which is formally independent, the DCEC is under the president's office, and its head is selected by the president. Despite raising legitimate questions regarding the independence of the DCEC, this arrangement shows the political leadership's support for the work of the directorate (UN 2007). The current head of the DCEC, Rose Seretse, attributes the progress made to the political will of Botswana's government: "Some countries just set up anti-corruption agencies as a window-dressing mechanism, but with the DCEC, there has been a lot of political will, and I think that has really kept us going" (Kuris 2013).

Other anti-corruption factors

Other factors, have also contributed to Botswana's good anti-corruption performance:

- The judiciary is generally considered independent and it actively reviews the executive's decisions. However some concerns have been raised in recent years, mostly due to the discretionary power of the president in the appointment of high-level judges and the outcomes of cases involving high-ranking officials in corruption trials.
- Botswana's civil service is autonomous and has been protected from widespread politicisation. Indeed, since the independence of the country, recruitment of civil servants has mostly been based on merit.
- Transparency and participation in policy formulation and public spending: budgeting, development planning and prioritisation is done in consultation with local government, communities and civil society organisations. (Mungiu-Pippdi 2015).

Despite its good performance in controlling corruption compared to other countries in the region, questions regarding sustainability remain. Should the political power change, the effectiveness of Botswana's institutional set up to fight corruption will largely depend on continued political will. Botswana lacks some of the legal constraints that would prevent a deterioration of corruption levels, such as formal independence of the anti-corruption bodies, access to information and whistleblower protection laws. Civil society also remains quite weak (Transparency International 2007; Mungiu-Pippdi 2015).

Anti-corruption progress in Estonia

Estonia is considered an anti-corruption top-achiever in comparison with the other former Soviet countries. It scored 69 on Transparency International's CPI in 2014, sharing the 26th rank with France and Qatar. The WGI also show good performances, with an 88 percentile rank on control of corruption (Transparency International 2014; Kaufmann et al. 2014).

In the 2013 Special Eurobarometer Survey on corruption, 4% of Estonian respondents said they have been asked or expected to pay a bribe over the previous 12 months, which is the EU average. In addition, only 31% of respondents thought that corruption levels had increased in the past three years – the lowest percentage in the EU (EC 2014a).

Political leadership

The political leadership of post-independence Estonia emerged from a context of struggle for independence from the Soviet political regime. Competitive political parties led by leaders from outside the old political nomenklatura enabled good governance as part of a revolutionary program: to remove Russian power elites and Soviet times 'rules of the game' (Kalniņš 2014).

Mart Laar, the first prime minister of Estonia post-independence, and his government are given considerable credit for the rapid and clean transition to one of the most prosperous and corruption-free countries in all of central and eastern Europe (Kalniņš 2014). Estonia's new leaders were strongly committed to neutralising corruption opportunities and corrupt actors, and thoroughly built, simplified, and improved rules and regulations, as well as the agencies that enforced them (Abrams and Fish 2015). They undertook a radical reform of the judiciary and public administration, managed a relatively clean and rapid privatisation process, and created transparency through e-government and access to information law.

Radical reform of the judiciary and public administration

After independence, Estonia drastically changed its court system: rather than just reforming the old one inherited from the Soviet era, a completely new court system was created under a newly established supreme court. All the judges had to be appointed anew, including those from the Soviet era who wanted to continue their career.

By the end of 1995, only half of the former Soviet judges remained and, because the number of judges almost doubled in that time, they were a minority.

In other public institutions, the renewal of staff was not as radical but took place nonetheless. Many cadres from the Soviet time willingly left or were side-lined, and new personnel was hired to fill vacant and newly created positions. Since 1995, recruitment of public servants has been merit-based.

Even though the primary goal of these reforms was not to address corruption, the fundamental turnover in the judiciary and public administration disrupted the old Soviet elite networks and their role as drivers of corruption in the country (Kalniņš 2014; 2015).

Open and inclusive privatisation

In all former Soviet countries, privatisation of state-owned enterprises is seen as a corruption-tainted process. Estonia's privatisation was not completely exempt from corruption, but it was done mostly following a transparent, auction-based procedure, under the control of the specially created Estonian Privatisation Agency. International tenders were used and temporary professional staff from the country and from abroad were hired. All those factors helped to ensure an independent and impartial process by reducing potential control by old bureaucrats and politicians (Kalniņš 2014; 2015).

E-government and access to information

Transparency is considered to have been key in consolidating and strengthening Estonia's governance. It was achieved through wide internet access, e-government (online public services) and access to information law. The Public Information Act, adopted in 2000, stipulates what kind of information must be made public (budgets, salaries, document registries, and so on). In addition, public information is systematically shared via dedicated government websites, which increases de facto access to information (Kalniņš 2015; TI Estonia 2012).

The indirect role of civil society

During the Soviet era, Estonia's civil society was completely eradicated. However, Estonia started rebuilding its civil society earlier than other ex-USSR countries. Before independence (1985-87) several civil society movements were created: an

environment protection movement, a cultural heritage movement and a citizen's committees movement. Mart Laar was one of the leaders of both cultural heritage and citizens' committees movements, as were many other post-Soviet era political leaders. Civil society thus played an important if indirect role in Estonia's successful transition and low levels of corruption (Kasemets 2012).

Estonian civil society has developed a lot since independence and is one of the strongest and most sustainable in central and eastern Europe (USAID 2014). Civil society became more influential during the EU accession years, and its participation in the elaboration and implementation of anti-corruption policies has increased since the early 2000s (Mungiu-Pippidi 2010).

Anti-corruption progress in South Korea

South Korea is considered one of the countries in Asia to have made the greatest progress in terms of control of corruption, even though it is still a "borderline" case. With a score of 55, South Korea ranks in 43rd position in Transparency International's CPI 2014. Similarly, the WGI give South Korea a 70 percentile rank on control of corruption (Transparency International 2014; Kaufmann et al. 2014).

Bribery and petty corruption are quite uncommon in South Korea. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2013, only 3% of citizens had paid a bribe over the previous 12 months. In addition, South Koreans seem to trust their government to fight corruption, with 56% thinking it is efficient in that regard (Transparency International 2013).

However, corporate and political corruption are still widespread, despite an ambitious reform of the corporate and financial sectors following the financial crisis of 1997. This reform aimed *inter alia* to end crony capitalism and to enhance transparency and accountability in corporate governance and accounting practices. After initial success, the effects of the reform seem to be fading (Kalinowski and Kim 2014; You 2015).

Other reforms, such as civil service reform and the introduction of e-government and access to information proved very successful.

Civil service reform

The establishment of a meritocratic recruitment and promotion system in Korea's public administration, via competitive examination, is generally considered an important factor in the country's reduction of corruption, in particular administrative corruption (You 2015).

E-government and access to information

Transparency and openness of government was enhanced by a series of new laws, such as the Freedom of Information Act and the Administrative Procedures Act adopted in 1996, as well as by the introduction of e-government and budget transparency.

South Korea's budget platform, launched in 2007, is considered an innovative approach to budget transparency and, according to a survey, the great majority of the users (public officials and citizens) consider that it has helped increase transparency and efficiency in public spending (Hwang 2012; Martini 2014a).

Since 2002, South Korea also has what is considered one of the most comprehensive e-procurement systems in the world. It helps identify corrupt companies and exclude them from future bidding processes. The OECD Working Group found that since its introduction, transparency within procurement processes has significantly improved (OECD 2011; Kalinowski and Kim 2014).

The role of political leadership and civil society

Kim Young-Sam, who led the movement against military dictatorships before becoming president in 1993, introduced several anti-corruption policies, such as the disclosure of assets by high-level public officials, the real-name financial transaction system, and amendments to Political Funding Law and the Disclosure of Information by Public Agencies Act. The government's commitment to fighting corruption lost credibility following a corruption scandal involving Kim Young-Sam. His successor, Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2002), continued the crackdown on corruption with the adoption of a comprehensive Anti-Corruption Law in 2001 and exhibited a strong commitment by establishing the Anti-Corruption Commission directly under the president in 1999. As in the Botswana case, the sustainability of the Commission's effectiveness is exposed to the political will of subsequent presidents. Both the law and the Commission came as a response to the 1997 financial crisis

and also due to increased pressure by civil society (Mondo 2011; Transparency International 2006).

Korean civil society has been very active in the fight against corruption starting with the democratic transition of 1987. For instance, civil society campaigns were a key factor in the adoption of freedom of information and the Anti-Corruption Act. Some also consider that the prosecution of two former corrupt presidents would not have happened without the pressure from civil society, as the ruling president was initially reluctant to prosecute them. (You 2015; Kalinowski and Kim 2014; Mondo 2011).

2. Lessons learned: Common factors

Due to the many shapes of corruption and the multitude of actors, institutions and processes seeking to address it, it is exceedingly difficult to single out specific factors which directly caused or led to reductions in corruption (Chêne 2012). There is no magic recipe with a specific set of ingredients applicable to all. In every country that has shown progress in controlling corruption to date, a combination of several factors was at play. While these factors vary from country to country, there is one element which is present everywhere: political leadership. Other factors that are common to several countries include public support and demand from citizens and civil society.

Political leadership

The lack of political will is often invoked as a reason for failure of anti-corruption reforms. Political leaders make the laws and allocate the powers, manpower and funds that enable them to be effectively enforced. Without their involvement, succeeding in significantly reducing corruption seems highly unlikely (Kukutschka 2014).

Progress in Georgia, Liberia and Rwanda, political leadership has been identified as the essential factor. In Georgia, anti-corruption was at the core of the new government's political agenda and the new leadership appeared genuinely committed to introducing anti-corruption reforms tackling frontline bribery. In Liberia, President Sirleaf has actively supported the anti-corruption programme from her first days in office. Similarly in Rwanda, most analysts recognise the existence of a sustained and genuine political will to fight

corruption at the service delivery levels (Chêne 2011).

The critical importance of political will in curbing corruption is corroborated by the cases of Botswana, Estonia and South Korea.

Political leadership and a commitment to fight corruption at the highest levels thus appear to be pre-requisites for initiating and sustaining reforms over time, until results are achieved.

Consequently, in countries where this political will is absent, insufficient or wanes, the first step towards control of corruption will be to (re)build it. In this regard, pressure from civil society and citizens on political leaders can be a major driver to generate political will (Kukutschka 2014).

Alternatively, it should be noted that some reforms motivated by other concerns and interests can have the effect of reducing corruption. In Chile for example, anti-corruption did not appear to be the primary purpose of reforms. Neoliberal policies reduced access to resources and the policy reforms resulted in considerable constraints for spending and demands for performance results. Similarly, in Uruguay, actions to deal with patronage/clientelism also appear to have been motivated by economic growth concerns. (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). This is also illustrated by the reform of the judiciary and public administration in Estonia (Kalniņš 2014).

Demand from citizens and civil society

Public demand can be a key driver for change and public support facilitates the adoption and implementation of reforms. This is especially true in the case of reforms ultimately aiming at deep-seated behavioural and institutional changes such as anti-corruption reforms.

In Georgia, the Rose Revolution marked the culmination of public frustration with rampant corruption. The new government, succeeding the highly corrupt Shevardnadze regime, could rely on public support and use the momentum for change opened by the peaceful shift of power to overcome the resistance of the past and initiate massive anti-corruption reforms. In Liberia and Rwanda, the post-conflict situation of both countries also brought demand and support for change from the public (Chêne 2011).

The role of civil society in building public demand for anti-corruption reforms varies from country to

country. In Botswana for example, civil society did not play any notable role: there are very few organisations focussing on governance issues and they are quite under-resourced. However, independent media played a major role in revealing the corruption scandals of the early 1990s, which led to the establishment of the DCEC (Kuris 2013; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015).

In South Korea, civil society played a major role by initiating many transparency and anti-corruption legislation and programmes and by acting as a watch-dog. Going even further, You argues that each reform that led to corruption reduction was achieved at least partly by the struggle of civil society and in turn helped to empower civil society (You 2015).

Bottom-up approaches to anti-corruption: collective action

Collective action refers to actions undertaken by groups of individuals and/or organisations towards a collective purpose or goal. Attempting to foment collective action as an anti-corruption strategy is a tactic that is enjoying growing support where individual change of behaviour is too costly; trust in others adherence to common norms or performance is low; integrity is too weak to resist unethical pressures, or; where influence for change needs strengthening. Most such contexts can be found where corruption is endemic (Pieth 2012).

Experience suggests that collective action can contribute to positive outcomes at the local level, but there is no evidence that it can trigger systemic change. Nevertheless, there have been a few successes in establishing instruments for accountability at the macro level. For example, in Brazil, a coalition of civil society organisations started a popular movement against parliamentary impunity that led to the adoption of a clean record bill, preventing politicians with a criminal record from running for office for at least eight years. (Wheatland and Chêne 2015).

Other common factors

Conducive external environment

Among other factors that seem to have played a role in several of the countries that managed to reduce corruption is the external environment. For example, Georgia's aspiration to join the EU has stimulated anti-corruption reforms. In Estonia, those external factors were multiple: the

accession to the EU and NATO, but also the influence of its Nordic neighbours, especially Finland.

Transparency reforms

The adoption of access to information laws and the introduction of e-government seem to have had a positive impact on the control of corruption in several countries (Georgia, Estonia, and South Korea). More detailed information on these topics can be found in previous U4 Expert and Helpdesk answers:

- [Right to information laws: Impact and implementation](#)
- [Transparency in budget execution](#)
- [The role of technology in reducing corruption in public procurement](#)

3. Conclusion

Modern examples of countries that have succeeded in reducing corruption are few and disputed. Often cited are the city-state Singapore and Hong Kong, Georgia and Liberia which were analysed in a previous U4 Expert Answer, as well as Botswana, Estonia and South Korea which are reviewed in more detail in this answer.

Due to the many shapes of corruption and the multitude of actors, institutions and processes seeking to address it, it is exceedingly difficult to single out specific factors which directly caused or led to reductions in corruption in those countries.

However, all the cases studied here showed some level of political leadership and political will to address corruption, and no example of a country that has managed to reduce corruption without political leadership, using a bottom-up, society-driven approach could be found. Political leadership and a commitment to fight corruption at the highest levels appear to be essential to achieve results.

Pressure from civil society and citizens on political leaders can be a major driver to generate political will. This approach was very successful in South Korea, where civil society played a major role in the country's anti-corruption performance by initiating many transparency and anti-corruption legislation and programmes and by acting as a watch-dog.

Bottom-up, society-driven approaches to anti-corruption, such as fomenting collective action, are enjoying growing support. However, experience so far suggests that collective action is

difficult to foster and evidence of successes is scarce. More research on the subject is needed.

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