

Tackling Corruption through Civil Society-led Information and Communication Technology Initiatives

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Information and Communication Technology: Shaping the 21st Century

Information and communication technology (ICT) is one of the most powerful forces shaping the 21st century. ICT—defined here as technologies that electronically facilitate the processing, transmission, and display of information—provides faster and cheaper communication. It facilitates the sweeping reorganization of businesses and boosts efficiency and productivity. It reduces transaction costs and barriers to entry. It allows people to seek, acquire, and share expertise, ideas, services, and technologies locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. It generally makes markets work more efficiently. Globalization is its most pronounced outcome.

Bearing in mind that almost half the world—over 3 billion people—live on less than \$2.50 a day,¹ developing countries that harness ICT for internet and mobile phone connectivity can leapfrog stages of development. This said, ICT can serve goals other than sustainable economic growth and public welfare. Given the primacy of governance in development effectiveness, one of ICT's most important applications is in e-government.²

Fighting Corruption through ICT

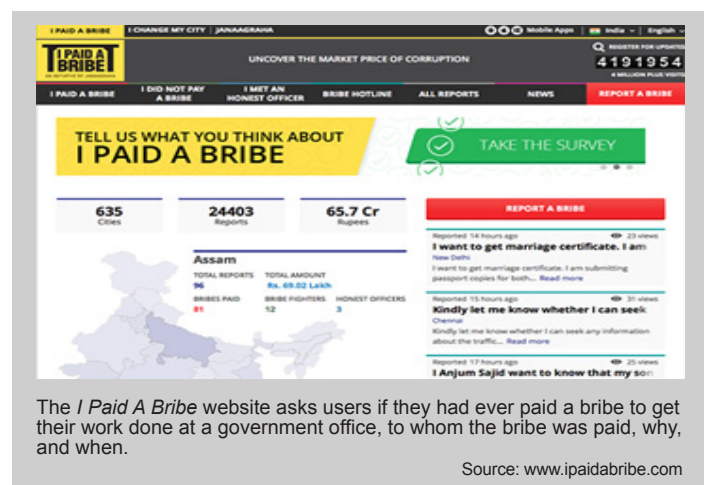
A Democratic Medium to Fight Corruption. ICT has a great potential to act as a democratic medium, as evidenced by its current uses for e-government. Several factors have encouraged this trend. These include the growing interest in the potential of e-government and open data to improve government and spur growth and innovation, and ICT's capability to address specific principal-agent problems and domesticate other disruptive technologies. Outside or competitive pressure and bottom-up pressure from citizens have also increased ICT usage.

ICT is now widely used in e-government. Its appeal lies in its enormous potential to improve public service delivery, increase transparency and accountability in government agencies, and raise the level of participation available to citizens in the governance process.

Corruption—the abuse of public office for private gain—can occur at a grand or petty scale at all levels of society. Regardless of where it takes place, corruption tends to affect the poorest sectors of society the most, especially in the competition for scarce resources and inadequately funded services. ICT offers

Highlights

- Information and communication technology (ICT) offers unparalleled opportunities to foster civil society participation in the development process.
- ICT-driven initiatives by civil society now play an increasing role in governance, promoting transparency and accountability that can potentially contribute to the fight against corruption.
- Development agencies can strengthen ICT initiatives by funding projects and programs that foster institutional environments conducive to participation in public affairs, promote cooperation and mobilization in anticorruption efforts, and develop capacities to fight corruption.



eight kinds of interventions that can potentially prevent, detect, analyze, and address corruption.³

Government-Initiated ICT Anticorruption Initiatives. Four of these eight ICT anticorruption interventions are usually led by the government. These are transparency and open-data portals, service automation, and online services. Portals for open data give access to data sets in machine-readable formats, while transparency portals provide timely publication of key government documents. Both primarily seek transparency. Service automation and online services, on the other hand, aim to automate transactions with government. Service automation replaces discretionary decision making by public officials while online services allow citizens to self-serve for public services access.

Civil Society-Led ICT Anticorruption Initiatives. The other four ICT interventions are usually led by civil society. Two types of these interventions—online information requests and crowd-sourced reporting—seek transparency reforms. The former enables citizens to request public information through the Internet, while the latter allows people to report corruption and grievances and share data on reports and trends. The other two civil society ICT interventions—online corruption reporting and issue reporting—target transactions reforms. The first is used in reporting corruption or grievances, while the second allows citizens to report problems

¹ Poverty Facts and Stats. www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats

² E-government (short for electronic government) refers to the use of ICT to enhance service delivery in the public sector. It allows greater public access to information and makes governments more accountable to citizens. It encompasses digital interactions between a government and its citizens, government and business, government and employees, and government and governments.

³ T. Davies and S. Fumega. 2013. *Mixed Incentives: Adopting ICT Innovation in the Fight against Corruption. Practical Participation*. Draft working paper for U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre.

with public services. Apart from these, civil society also plays an important role in anticorruption theories of change around many government-led ICT interventions.

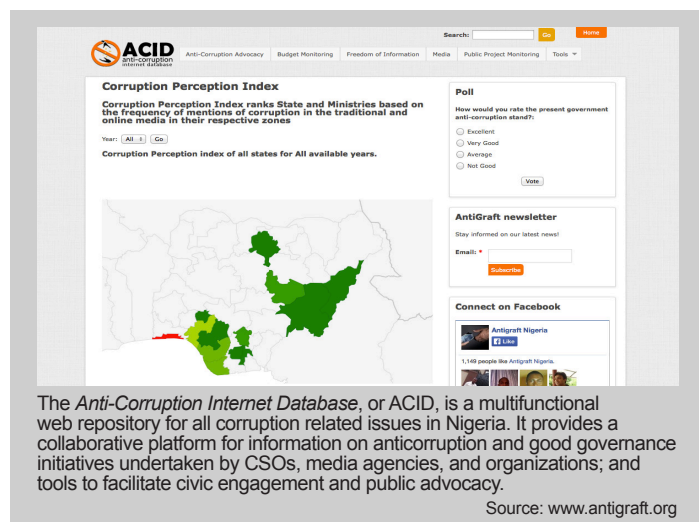
Strengthening Civil Society-Led ICT Initiatives Against Corruption

The majority of ICT-enabled anticorruption initiatives originate from civil society.⁴ Even where governments adopt ICT innovations for reasons not related to their anticorruption potential, civil society can help secure anticorruption uses of the technology.⁵ There have been two kinds of civil society-led interventions: push and pull. In the former, citizens speak up and communicate their experiences on an issue; in the latter, they draw information from available sources and use those to act in some way. Evidently, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) that enjoy a trusted relationship with their members or constituencies can channel information between the latter and government. They can also serve as watchdogs. If they are well-developed, they can also represent a wide variety of interests and bring diverse perspectives to design strategy and increase chances of success. Not all CSOs display these ideal attributes. Limits may be imposed by government, resources, or citizens themselves who may not be sufficiently aware of the costs of corruption.

In poorer nations, development agencies are well-placed to promote outreach activities—among them ICT interventions—that strengthen civil society's contributions to the fight against corruption.⁶ They can foster institutional environments conducive to the development of civil society and its participation in public affairs.⁷ To do this, development agencies can fund projects and programs that advance basic civil liberties that allow active participation in anticorruption activities and other public affairs, promulgate legislation that facilitates the establishment of CSOs, promote the development of independent media that is able to scrutinize government operations freely, and contribute to increase government transparency and cooperation with CSOs.⁸

Development agencies can promote the cooperation of public and civil society actors in anticorruption efforts by boosting outreach initiatives such as the ADB Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Anti-Corruption Initiative for Asia and the Pacific.⁹



The Anti-Corruption Internet Database, or ACID, is a multifunctional web repository for all corruption related issues in Nigeria. It provides a collaborative platform for information on anticorruption and good governance initiatives undertaken by CSOs, media agencies, and organizations; and tools to facilitate civic engagement and public advocacy.

Source: www.antigrift.org

They can also encourage a broad mobilization against corruption by strengthening citizen support for existing CSOs that fight corruption. Equally, development agencies can also increase the participation of organizations whose primary interest is not to fight corruption.

Lastly, development agencies can enhance the capacities of CSOs that fight corruption by providing them with information and expertise, sponsoring training programs, contributing funds, and encouraging partnerships among civil society actors.

Transparency and accountability are central to the fight against corruption. Its most pernicious effect is the loss of faith in public institutions. Since corruption is a function of both the opportunity to abuse public office and the risk of detection, ICT is an invaluable tool. It bridges the gap between the demand for and supply of good governance. Development agencies, in working with civil society to fight corruption, can integrate ICT interventions for online right-to-information requests, crowd-sourced reporting, online corruption reporting, and issue reporting across a broad spectrum of outreach activities. These will foster institutional environments, promote cooperation, encourage a broad mobilization, and develop capacities in fighting corruption.

⁴ Here, civil society refers to groups other than government and business that operate around shared interests, purposes, and values. They include nongovernment organizations, trade unions, faith-based groups, professional organizations, and such.

⁵ For example, governments may set up open data portals primarily for economic benefit but civil society can campaign for related interventions to include important information on budgets and spending, and can use that to hold governments to account (provided, it has the awareness and technical skills needed to do this).

⁶ They can also associate directly with governments to advance the civil society-led ICT anti-corruption activities.

⁷ OECD. 2003. *Fighting Corruption: What Role for Civil Society? The Experience of the OECD*. Paris.

⁸ In the Philippines, for example, ADB has been strengthening citizen involvement in mitigating governance risks in local government units in the context of ADB's Second Governance and Anticorruption Action Plan, details of which are at www.adb.org/documents/second-governance-and-anticorruption-action-plan-gacap-ii. See TA 6445–REG: Support for Implementation of the Second Governance and Anticorruption Action Plan.

⁹ Details are at www.oecd.org/site/adboecdanti-corruptioninitiative

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