



Assessing political commitment to fighting corruption

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A variety of methods can be used to ascertain whether anticorruption efforts will have sustained—and essential—backing from political leaders

Rarely discussed 15 years ago, the commitment of political leaders to reform—that is, their willingness to implement and sustain reform—is now widely accepted as crucial for aid effectiveness. Nowhere is political commitment more important—and more difficult to sustain—than in implementing reforms to fight corruption. Governments increasingly seek external assistance to meet this challenge. More than any other public sector reform, reducing corruption may threaten political coalitions and a government's survival—and threats to political survival weaken the resolve of even the most committed leaders. This note describes methods that might be used to objectively evaluate a government's political commitment to reducing corruption, whether petty, grand, or systemic.

How and why is commitment assessed?

Assessments of political commitment to fighting corruption identify:

- The particular anticorruption reform for which commitment is sought.
- The political and bureaucratic actors whose support is needed to ensure the reform's success.
- The costs and benefits of reform for these actors.

There are at least three reasons to assess commitment to anticorruption efforts. First, an assessment allows governments and aid partners to form early judgments

on whether reforms will succeed, allowing for a more productive allocation of donor and country resources and avoiding costly project failures.

Second, an assessment of political commitment improves a project's chances for success and sustainability. For example, it identifies the actors who have the most to gain from anticorruption reform and the greatest ability to implement it. The reform program should then make those actors responsible for implementation.

Third, staff who have at their disposal a systematic assessment of commitment are better positioned to help committed country counterparts design meaningful strategies for robust and sustainable reform.

There are two methods for assessing political commitment. One depends on identifying key decisionmakers, their constituencies, and the potential political and financial costs to them of reducing corruption. The second approach focuses on events—such as statements of opposition to corruption or the removal of corrupt ministers—that might signal a commitment to fighting corruption.

Reforming what?

Corruption is often classified according to whether it is petty, grand, or systemic. Each form entails different reform strategies and analyses of political commitment. Petty corruption involves low-level officials extracting small sums through extortion, bribery, theft, or misuse of official property. Grand

For aid to be effective, political leaders must be committed to fighting corruption

The winners and losers from reform often differ depending on the type of corruption

corruption refers to high-level officials using their offices to grant contracts or extract large sums of money—perhaps from the public budget or, using their regulatory authority, by manipulating market outcomes—for their personal or political enrichment. When both petty and grand corruption are pervasive, corruption is systemic.

The winners and losers from reform often differ depending on the type of corruption. Grand corruption, involving as it does the highest decisionmakers, is more difficult to control because the losers are those who are primarily responsible for implementing reform. In this case successful reform will need to be spearheaded or supported by high-level government actors who do not benefit from corrupt activities.

High-level officials in many countries are strongly supportive of programs to eliminate petty corruption, because such corruption undermines their agencies' ability to deliver public services. With high-level support, interviews and surveys can be used to identify and quantify the specific corrupt practices.

Who are the reformers?

Once the nature of the reform is known, the next step is to identify the decisionmakers with the authority to propose and approve it. No government is a monolithic entity. Key players in a reform program are the executive branch, legislature, ministries, and civil service. These individuals often have competing or conflicting interests. Because a reform agenda to attack significant corruption will likely require approval by several of these actors, understanding these conflicting interests may help Bank staff better advise stakeholders on reform design.

BOX 1 PURSUING POLITICAL COMMITMENT IN GEORGIA

As part of its efforts to reduce corruption, the Georgian government has deregulated business registration and modernized the Customs Department and Tax Inspectorate. But the true test of political commitment is seen in the implementation and enforcement of laws. And while Geor-

gia has enacted laws, opposition from influential members of government has slowed their implementation—reflecting the point that government cannot be viewed as monolithic. Enforcement of laws ultimately demonstrates government commitment and capacity to reform.

It depends on the benefits . . .

Supporters of reforms typically see a variety of benefits from reducing corruption. Many political leaders have a strong moral aversion to corruption, and are concerned about its impact on development. Moreover, reducing corruption may improve a country's access to international organizations or foreign capital—access that is limited when corruption is perceived as being significant. Finally, officials may obtain political advantages by advocating reforms that support constituents who are victims of corruption, or that undermine political opponents who benefit from it.

. . . and the risks

The primary risk that anticorruption reform creates for decisionmakers is the possibility that it will undermine their political position. Experiences in Georgia, one of several countries in Europe and Central Asia to request Bank assistance, suggest that even a highly committed leader may face opposition from entrenched interests in government (box 1). Anticorruption reforms may also cut the funds needed to finance political campaigns and maintain supporters' loyalty. Obviously, decisionmakers who profit from their positions will likely oppose reforms. In the worst cases anticorruption reforms undermine the personal security of leaders, if they provoke a violent reaction from beneficiaries of corruption.

A variety of methods and sources can be used to assess the benefits and risks that anticorruption reforms pose to different decisionmakers. Anecdotal information is usually abundant and useful, and available from discussions with political officials, civil servants, private sector actors, and journalists. More formal methods, such as diagnostic surveys, may be particularly useful in understanding which government agencies are particularly corrupt (and whose officials are therefore most likely to resist reform) and which are least corrupt (and whose officials are most likely to support anticorruption efforts). Such surveys must always have local ownership and local sponsorship.

Surveys are also useful in shifting incentives by increasing government ownership of reform design. For example, if a government seeks increased foreign investment or membership in the European Union, diagnostic surveys that quantify corruption in sectors that are important for achieving these objectives may persuade officials to design appropriate reforms. For good examples of the use of surveys in fighting corruption, see PREMnote 7.

Other commitment signals

It may be difficult to assess political commitment using interviews or surveys. But there are two other ways to gauge the commitment to combating corruption: changes in the political and economic environment and actions by government. For example, government action to strengthen the assets declaration law in Latvia signals increasing commitment by government decision-makers (box 2).

Changes in the political and economic environment

Three changes in the political and economic environment may predict increased political commitment to anticorruption reform. First, an economic or political crisis may stimulate leaders to pursue far-reaching reforms in order to reestablish their hold on office. On the other hand, if a regime fears that its tenure is about to end, a final wave of rent-seeking actions may ensue. Thus a detailed analysis can significantly improve understanding of the commitment to reform at a particular juncture. Second, a new government that succeeds a notoriously corrupt government has both an incentive and an opportunity to fight corruption as a means of differentiating itself from the previous administration. Third, increased democratization that leads to a larger number of independent government decisionmakers creates greater potential for officials to hold each other accountable.

Actions by government

A variety of government actions indicate a commitment to reducing corruption. If offi-

cial statements that condemn corruption and call for its elimination are not followed by action, they are signals of weak political commitment. Stronger but still uncertain signals include the establishment of ombudsmen, supreme audit bodies, and anticorruption agencies. Such agencies are only as effective as the enforcement of laws against corruption. The success of Hong Kong's (China) Independent Commission Against Corruption stands out (box 3). This agency has many attributes unusual among anticorruption agencies—including independence, significant financing, direct citizen oversight, and considerable legal powers. If enforcement is a failure, commitment to further reform is problematic no matter how many new institutions governments establish.

What if political commitment is questionable?

Given the difficult political problems associated with fighting corruption, political commitment will often be weak or transitory. Still, external partners can help governments create an environment for future anticorruption reform. It can disseminate knowledge about different reforms and their effects. It can support reform champions with technical advice on the design of reforms. And it can foster collaborative efforts with civil society groups—particularly in building up information on the extent and sources of corruption in countries (for example, through diagnostic surveys).

Finally, the Bank can help governments facilitate interaction among potential winners from anticorruption reform. The Bank and other partners can organize workshops,

Detailed analysis
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BOX 2 REQUIRING A DECLARATION OF ASSETS IN LATVIA

Latvia's government shows increasing political commitment to fighting corruption. In September 1995 it passed a law requiring all officials from the president down to make a declaration of assets—a frequently suggested anticorruption reform. Deficiencies in the framing and implementation of the law,

however, rendered it largely ineffective. The current government has started drafting a new law that will clearly identify conflicts of interest and deal more stringently with gifts received by public servants. To strengthen implementation, officials will be able to compare declarations of income and assets over time.

BOX 3 LEARNING FROM HONG KONG'S ANTICORRUPTION COMMISSION

Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption is the world's most renowned anticorruption agency. What makes the commission remarkable is its advisory committees, which include representatives of government, the private sector, and civil society. The advisory committees impose accountability: once an investigation is launched, its progress is followed closely;

investigations cannot last for extended periods; and cases cannot be arbitrarily dropped. Although the commission's achievements have encouraged other governments to create similar agencies, few have replicated the oversight function of the advisory committees, matched the budget commitments put forth by the Hong Kong government, or enjoyed the commission's success.

task forces, and other forums to bring together civil society, public servants, journalists, and eminent individuals who might influence the incentives of political leaders. In addition, sponsoring international meetings of individuals—parliamentarians, journalists, activists, academics—from countries where corruption is a problem can enhance awareness and stimulate collective action for reform. Two points are important, however. First, the participants should be chosen not only for their professional position but also for their willingness to support reform. Second, there should be a critical mass of participants from each country (closer to 20 than to 2).

In some cases commitment to enacting reforms may be altogether lacking. The Bank and other donors then face a difficult set of choices. Options include suspending new loans, restricting them to poverty-reducing social investments, or ring-fencing the lending program with intense supervision. The first option precludes further Bank involvement in the anticorruption (or any other) dialogue in a country and depends for its success on whether the Bank's concerns are shared by other donors. The Bank needs

to actively share its concerns and views with its key development partners and ensure that its approach is broadly shared. The second option implies that the Bank will tolerate large losses as long as resources are targeted directly at the poor. The third strategy implies a dramatic escalation in the commitment of resources for supervision. These strategies are controversial, however, and their impact on corruption remains to be demonstrated.

Further reading

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