Combating Corruption of Public Officials

**Topic Background**
According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), corruption is defined as a “crime committed by officials abusing of their role to procure gain for themselves or somebody else.”¹ This background guide focuses exclusively on the corruption of public officials, which refers to politicians, civil servants, and government leaders who hold elected or appointed positions in a state-based institution or enterprise.²

Corruption among public officials is a serious global problem that diminishes public faith in the rule of law. By abusing their political power, government officials that engage in corrupt activities erode important norms of fairness, justice and trust, which can take decades to restore. In addition to decreasing the legitimacy and integrity of the state, corruption also has tangible impacts on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable populations. For instance, embezzling public infrastructure finance and foreign development assistance often undercuts resources needed for critical social services that support underprivileged communities.

On a global scale, corruption is also a direct contributor to money laundering, illicit trade and financial flows, and even terrorist financing. Evidence has shown that corruption harms the efficiency and trustworthiness of state systems, and exacerbates chronic poverty and inequality by distorting economic growth.³ Corruption affects everyone, and no one wins in the long-run.

The causes of corruption are often complex and intertwined. Poor regulatory environments and informal, unstandardized governing practices can give rise to under-the-table deals. The lack of transparency, poor quality, and even imbalanced gender composition of government institutions

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can play a role in creating favorable conditions for corruption. For example, in under-financed governments, low salaries in the civil service can render accepting bribes a means of survival for low-level officials who are underpaid.

But fundamentally, corruption is made possible by the unjustified concentration of power in government. Corruption is the most effective when one person or a handful of leaders dominate without oversight. Corruption also persists because the enforcement of legal prosecution is not strict or consistent in certain cases. If those in power know that they can get away with corruption without punishment, corruption will not stop. A lack of legal action may reflect a broader deficit of resources in the legal system, uncoordinated action within the government, or collusion between politicians and legal institutions.

Past International Action

Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015, the corruption of public officials is most directly linked to Goal 16 – peace, justice and strong institutions. SDG 16 seeks to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” Specifically, target 16.5 aims to “substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.” To achieve this ambitious goal by 2030, Member States must take strides to improve government transparency in their respective countries and collaborate through multilateral platforms.

The United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) is the primary UN agency responsible for addressing the issue of corruption, among other forms of international crime. In September 2004, UNODC published a ‘Global Programme Against Corruption – UN Anti-Corruption Toolkit.’ This toolkit shares successful anti-corruption measures that effectively deter, prevent, and combat corrupt acts. The UNODC also operates regional programs such as the UNODC Sub-Programme on Anti-Corruption for Southeast-Asia. This sub-programme partners with regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to build anti-corruption capacity. Specifically, UNODC provides technical assistance and training programs for national anti-corruption bodies in Southeast Asia.

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5 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Beyond the UN, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also play a critical role in keeping governments publicly accountable and monitoring policy compliance. Global civil society organizations such as Transparency International make an impact by assisting victims of and witnesses to corruption, publishing research about opaque governments, and advocating for more global anti-corruption efforts in international organizations.\textsuperscript{13} Established in 1993, Transparency International is a non-partisan, independent civil society group with more than 100 national chapters around the world.\textsuperscript{14}

To express solidarity for anti-corruption and craft a global framework, the UN has facilitated key international agreements to address the issue of corruption. On 31 October 2003, the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) was adopted by the UN General Assembly.\textsuperscript{15} As the most comprehensive document on the issue and the only “legally binding universal anti-corruption instrument,” the convention covers “preventive measures, criminalization and law enforcement, international cooperation, asset recovery, and technical assistance and information exchange.”\textsuperscript{16} The UNCAC also addresses private-to-public relations, which means that the document regulates interactions between businesses and public officials. As of 26 June 2018, there are 186 parties and 140 signatories to this convention.\textsuperscript{17}

**Possible Solutions**

First, anti-corruption efforts must seek to change the ‘traditions’ that normalize gift-giving as a means of “getting things done” in government. Public officials should not need to earn a living by accepting money under the table, and everyday citizens must stop feeding the culture of bribery.\textsuperscript{18} To accomplish this change in norms, raising awareness through public education is key. Governments and NGOs alike can shed light on the dark corners of corruption by publishing and reporting transparency data to the public and international agencies.

Second, political will from within governments is incredibly important to combat corruption. However, it is equally important to ensure that zealous anti-corruption measures are legally and procedurally just. This means that power cannot be abused in the process of addressing corruption. This seemingly paradoxical point can be observed in the cases of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who have been criticized by some for using national anti-corruption campaigns as an opportunity to target political opponents, fire critics from public positions, and consolidate power in the upper echelons of government.\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{13} “What is Transparency International?” Transparency International. \url{https://www.transparency.org/about}

\textsuperscript{14} “Overview.” Transparency International. \url{https://www.transparency.org/whoweare/organisation}


\textsuperscript{19} “Swept up in China’s anti-corruption campaign, and forsaken by a secretive, suspect legal system.” South China Morning Post. \url{https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2156620/swept-chinas-anti-corruption-campaign-and-forsaken}
corruption efforts must be carried out in a way that reflects the spirit of, rather than undermines, robust legal processes.

Third, on an international scale, UN Member States should align domestic laws with the implementation of international frameworks. For example, the Corruption of Foreign Public Officials Act of Canada was adopted in 1998 to enhance national legislation and tighten restrictions on corruption. This Canadian act simultaneously ratified an international instrument - the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions. Today, transnational corporations often exploit loose regulatory environments for dubious commercial activity abroad. As global interconnectivity has become a reality, international commercial transactions will become increasingly common, inevitably putting more corporations in contact with different legislations and governments. Thus, governments that suffer from weak enforcement power must seek to address the legal and political loopholes left behind by past and current acts of corruption, especially by referencing international frameworks.

While corruption among public officials is commonly perceived to be more prevalent in non-democratic and lower- or lower-middle-income countries, partly because such societies are home to gift economy cultures, corruption is truly a global challenge that affects affluent economies and emerging markets alike. In developed countries, corporate collusion with governments, blatant nepotism or cronyism, and tax fraud among public officials are some of the many forms of corruption that continue to take place. It is important to remember that while corruption may look different in different national contexts, every Member State has a stake in eradicating this issue with global implications.

In a 2018 quote praising Nigeria and Tunisia’s anti-corruption efforts, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged UN Member States to recognize that corruption is “neither an acceptable cost of doing business or a necessary evil, but simply an unacceptable crime.” Corruption permeates all aspects of economic development, erodes norms of good governance, and poses a serious threat to sustainable development around the world. Delegates in this committee should seek to develop strong, concrete solutions to this topic of paramount importance.

Further Research


22 “These are the 18 most corrupt countries in the developed world.” The Independent/Business Insider. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/these-are-the-18-most-corrupt-countries-in-the-developed-world-a7066391.html
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16


https://www.transparency.org/

Worksheet Questions

1. What is the full name of the UN agency working on the issue of corruption of public officials?
2. What does the acronym ‘UNCAC’ stand for? Why is this an important international agreement?
3. How can civil society organizations contribute to anti-corruption efforts in the public sector?
4. Name three major causes that give rise to corruption among public officials.
5. Why are the anti-corruption campaigns in China and the Philippines controversial?