

9th International Anti-Corruption Conference
Regional workshop for Asia and Pacific

Cultivating Transparency

By Shane Cave, Communications Manager, TI - New Zealand

This paper is based on a project being run in the Pacific by TI New Zealand and TI - Fiji.

It is necessary only for the good man to say nothing for corruption to triumph.

With apologies to Edmund Burke (1729 - 1797)

One of the key characteristics of corruption is that it is secret. Secrecy, and the involvement of powerful public figures, makes it difficult for the legal system of many states to effectively curtail corrupt practices. In such societies public pressure, and pressure from external sources, is a vital tool in mobilising civil society in the fight against corruption. A free news media is central to this mobilisation. But a free news media with limited sources of information is of little use.

In many countries, and regions, there are people who work in the financial system who are familiar with the detail of corruption but are themselves not party to it. Such people provide banking services and financial advice, and administer multilateral and bilateral development agencies. They have a strong professional interest in stamping out corruption which impedes the efficiency of the financial system in which they work, and consequently distorts efficient development and investment decisions, to say nothing of its corrosive effect on society generally.

At the same time there are journalists serving the society, the region and the countries contributing investment and development capital to the country. These journalists also have a strong professional interest in identifying corruption. Such stories are particularly attractive to journalists and their audience.

Thus, the two groups have a mutual interest in the public exposure of corruption, but are often suspicious of each other. Such suspicion impedes the development of a transparent culture and perpetuates the closed environments in which corruption can most easily prosper.

Many developing countries have closed elites who have little contact with journalists and so have little public accountability. In such cases there is no real culture of transparency. This allows bribery and diversion of taxes and development funds to the personal benefit of the members of the elite.

In such cases public exposure of the corruption in the news media of the country concerned, in regional news media and the news media of donor nations, is one of the most feasible constraints on such corruption. [It has to be added that in some countries there is exposure but it achieves little, at least in the short term. However in the long term it is possible to point to many societies where corrupt regimes have eventually been overthrown

because of the cumulative public resentment arising from widespread knowledge of corruption.]

But the limited contact and trust between the two groups, financiers and journalists, with the most immediate interest in such exposure, retards the development of public transparency.

In such cases it is possible that a more transparent culture can be cultivated by bringing together small numbers of individuals from the two groups, to allow them to get to know each other and understand the constraints under which the other works.

Such fora will involve discussion of the issues involved in this informal but vital transmission of information. The fora must also be structured to allow individuals from each group to develop some rapport with individuals from the other group, so that there can be both candour and trust in future contact between them.

Out of such contact a more transparent and better informed society will gradually be born, allowing the dissemination of information to which the public has a right but which they would otherwise be denied, and allowing journalists to seek a range of advice on more general economic and business affairs. This should be seen as a long term process.

In such fora it is important to have relatively limited and equal numbers from each group so that personal relationships can be initiated. It is also important to ensure that there are financiers with a regional focus and journalists providing information to the wider region and to citizens in donor nations. This allows information to be sourced from people in different countries from that in which the corruption occurs (such sources are less likely to be intimidated) and to be published by journalists not able to be suppressed by those whose corruption is liable to be exposed.

Clarifying the nature of bilateral and multilateral development funds in such societies also acts as an incentive for news media in donor news markets to report the corruption by linking the source of the funds to the corruption. This in turn will make donors more likely to act against administrations or institutions where their funds are directly or indirectly used corruptly.

Such regional and international reportage has also become important with the increasing number of countries ratifying the OECD Anti Corruption Convention, which makes bribery in foreign countries a domestic offence.

After the programme it is hoped that journalists will begin to develop new sources of information and establish alternative routes for guidance on stories of corruption, general business, and economic performance. Such processes as are outlined here can only form part of a much wider programme to cultivate more transparent societies and combat corruption. Such a programme complements better public and private sector accounting procedures, better criminal codes and official information laws, and more independent policing and judicial systems. But without a more transparent culture much of the corruption which currently occurs will continue.

This programme is currently being developed for the Pacific by TI - NZ and TI- Fiji with the financial support of the New Zealand and British Governments.

For further information contact:
Shane Cave, Communications Manager
Transparency International - New Zealand

P.O. Box 1590, Wellington, New Zealand

Ph. (64 4) 299 7928

Fax (64 4) 471 1767

email scave@ihug.co.nz