

Mapping corruption: why words make a difference

By Hiram Chodosh

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As I observed two weeks ago in this column, the vernacular for corruption is rich, awareness increasingly acute and legal strategies increasingly aggressive; yet, accepted conceptions and definitions of corruption are far from universal. Why is this so? And why does it matter?

The primary reason for variance in how we grasp phenomena of corruption is easier to appreciate if we consider that a wide array of behavioral patterns may fall under that general rubric. Concerns vary from those concerned about the misuse of public office for private gain to private sector kickbacks for coercive commercial behavior, or from the illegal appropriation of large public funds to the payment of even modest amounts of money to public officials in charge of ministerial decisions. Given the wide array of phenomena, we should not be surprised to observe definitional diversity.

Yet, three specific problems emerge from this understandable condition. First, survey data in particular can be misleading if the troublesome behaviors are not adequately defined. National comparisons can be easily skewed by the tendency to prioritize certain corrupt behaviors over others. For example, some societies distinguish between those payments made to public officials before and others after their decisions, and may not view the latter as equally problematic. Second, focusing on the nature of a single transaction can take attention away from web-like networks of corrupt behavior. Webs of illicit transactions and payoffs often include the supervisors or superiors (who often receive a percentage of a bribe as patronage or compensation for looking the other way). When these networks reach into the very system for enforcing anti-corruption laws, reform challenges become even more insuperable.

Finally, and more importantly, without a clear conception of corruption, it becomes harder to focus limited resources and attention on the critically important patterns of behavior. Low value bribes for obtaining a birth or death certificate may be viewed differently from a large kickback in a state procurement program, and the level of priority for each should influence reform strategy.

Beyond these distinctions, the broader context matters. The universal application of a single definition to diverse roles of the state and society may produce counterintuitive effects. Perceptions of corruption and its impact rarely take account of whether the formal public policy, rules, regulations, procedures, and processes undermined by corruption are truly in the public interest. Arguably, in countries where there is little alignment of public authority and public interests, corruption may be seen as a necessary evil, one that advances human development and freedom against the negative effects of a repressive state. Black markets may sustain economic

development in overly repressive state economies. Corruption may be the only economic solution to an economically stultifying bureaucracy. The former Soviet

Union and its satellites were a particular case in point.

In addition to these greater challenges of conception, definition, and context, anti-corruption reform is burdened by one additional difficulty. In an attempt to avoid overly judgmental or harsh rhetoric, the international community has tempted to utilize grand phrases of good governance, transparency, accountability, and even the rule of law to emphasize positive attributes of legal systems that prevent and combat corruption effectively. Placing corruption in a broader governance or rule of law framework may be an extremely positive development, but euphemisms or sugar-coating dilute the force of descriptions of harmful criminal activity. Perhaps they should be avoided.

The words we select to describe corruption matter. Working definitions not only reflect our judgments about what is most important. They also help critically to clarify and focus what precisely one seeks to achieve in anti-corruption reform.

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