WHY ANTI-CORRUPTION CRUSADES
OFTEN FAIL TO WIN LASTING VICTORIES

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to participate at the Anti-Corruption Summit 2000. It is a pleasure to return to such a forum.

Two years ago, I presented a paper at the Anti-Corruption Summit in Miami on the status of United Nations resolutions against corruption. At that time, I focused mostly on the normative work of an intergovernmental body such as the United Nations. Today, I would like to share my views on why anti-corruption crusades often fail to win lasting victories. In doing so, I will be touching upon the technical cooperation or assistance side of the mandate of the United Nations. At the request of Member States, the United Nations Secretariat provides policy and programme advice at the national or regional level. Since I head the Division for Public Economics and Public Administration, the requests we receive about combating corruption have to do with strengthening preventive anti-corruption measures in the public sector.

In my presentation, I would like to focus on two aspects of these crusades: political and administrative. Under these aspects, I would like to illustrate some of my points with concrete examples drawn from our experience generally and press reports. On the press reports, if you go to our Divisional web-site: www.un.org/esa/governance/ and look under “Library”, you will find our monthly Governance World Watch. This document is a compilation of press clippings on governance issues, including an extensive coverage of up-to-date corruption reports. Finally, I will sum up my presentation by describing some of the developments that we have been involved in preventing corruption and promoting ethics in the public sector.

Anti-Corruption Crusades

Before I begin, I would like to review what is meant by anti-corruption crusades. Simply put, these crusades are the announcements by an organization that concerted action will be taken to fight corruption. Usually, these types of campaigns are started at the national or sub-national government level or at the ministry or agency level. For instance, Nigeria’s current campaign to not tolerate corruption and recover state assets lost through past corrupt acts is an example of a crusade at the national government level, with commitment voiced by the Head of State. In Australia, several state-level governments have set up commissions to investigate allegations of corruption and sought to publicize their findings and corrective actions in the past. As for the ministry or agency level initiatives, those entities that are more prone to corruption by virtue of their functions often pronounce their commitment to in-house clean-up. The President-Elect of Mexico announced this summer that the federal police and public prosecutors will be
completely reorganized to deal with entrenched corruption in their current organizations. Sound law enforcement is an essential precondition to fighting corruption.

However, anti-corruption crusades do not only belong to the sphere of governments. They can also be initiated by private sector organizations, such as a group of businesses, or by civil society organizations, such as religious institutions or non-governmental advocacy groups. In fact, many government crusades are a result of pressure by watchdog groups that demand accountability in the face of a scandal or exposed corrupt acts. In South Africa, an organization called Business Against Crime not only monitors organized crime but also corruption in the public sector. Bulgaria’s Coalition 2000 anti-corruption initiative was started and is run by a non-governmental organization (NGO), the Center for the Study of Democracy, in cooperation with government institutions and a number of other NGOs. The founding of Transparency International organization with its country chapters can be seen as a very good example of a civil society anti-corruption crusade at the global level.

As is the case with Transparency International, generally it is the vision of a dedicated individual or a group of individuals that kicks off a crusade – whether initiated by the government, private sector, or civil society. Since the United Nations deals primarily with national governments as its Member States, I will confine my observations and remarks mostly to this group.

A government usually launches an anti-corruption crusade with lots of fanfare and pronouncements of lofty ideals. These types of exercises are usually greeted by a lot of hope and cynicism at the same time. An expectation is created that changes will come about to punish those persons who have carried out gross corrupt acts in the past and prevent others in the future from doing likewise. Sometimes these crusades do result in prominent and highly-placed public officials who have engaged in corruption in being punished and serving as a deterrent to others. China is getting a lot of press coverage these days for making examples of high-ranking officials who have engaged in corrupt practices. Other times, the crusades remain at the level of rhetoric and do not result in any significant changes. We are interested in the reasons for the latter cases, in order to increase the success rates of anti-corruption campaigns. And as I mentioned earlier, I have grouped them into two categories: political and administrative.

**Political Reasons for Failures of Anti-corruption Crusades**

Politically, there are many reasons why anti-corruption reforms do not take root. First, it may be that the crusade was never a serious attempt at reform, with the government simply reacting to a scandal or, in the case of many developing countries, external pressure from donors. If a government is simply going through the motions, it may not put the right people or adequate resources into the crusade. This will result in the crusade not having any serious impact or simply fizzling out. For example, when the Turkish Parliament began investigating allegations of corruption of its two former Prime Ministers, it looked like the beginning of a serious anti-corruption crusade. However,
current media reports of the Parliament clearing them of these charges have fueled speculations that the campaign is not serious and “a safe political exercise.”

Second, a government may use the excuse of an anti-corruption crusade to carry out witch hunts of its opponents. Under such circumstances, people will become uneasy about whistle-blowing or exposing corruption as they do not know the real motives for such an exercise. In fact, the seeming singling out or framing of innocent individuals would quickly blow the credibility of such a "reform." Taken a step further, anti-corruption crusades can be used to justify military coups to undermine, weaken and topple democratic governments. In the recent past, Malaysia has publicized its adoption of a tough anti-corruption law and setting up an anti-corruption commission. But of late, due to the controversy of the charges of corruption against its former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, less is heard about the Malaysian anti-corruption crusade. Pakistan and Ivory Coast are now under military governments as a result of a coup in protest of the corruption under the previous regimes.

Third, a government may be very serious about fighting corruption but do not take the time and the effort to consult and get the buy-in of its social partners: businesses and civil society entities. Without a national consensus, even a genuine anti-corruption crusade driven by a government may be misconstrued or not be supported by the rest of society. In Bolivia, a national anti-corruption plan had been drawn up by experts within the past several years. But because there had not been wide consultations, some of the church groups were not in total support. The government had to step back from implementation to try to call for a national policy dialogue.

Fourth, a government may genuinely start an anti-corruption campaign and be put out of power or shift its political priorities. This type of scenario calls for a need to also ensure that opposition is also on board of anti-corruption crusades. Then, even when there is a transition of power or a shift in political priorities, the opposition will either come into power or put pressure on the government to continue on with reforms. The importance of involving the opposition parties is illustrated by what is currently happening in Japan. The opposition-proposed bill to prevent political corruption through banning lawmakers from receiving goods in return for political favours has mobilized some members of the ruling party to agitate for their party to take action on this front.

There may be other combinations of reasons at the political level, but in the interest of time, I will end with these four. I will now turn to the administrative reasons for why anti-corruption crusades do not show results.

**Administrative Reasons for Failures of Anti-Corruption Crusades**

Even if serious political will is in place to combat corruption, often costly administrative mistakes, both in resources and time, can deter a long lasting effect of reforms. First, it is often very tempting for both donors and recipient governments to take on "wholesale" solutions from other countries, without really taking the time to
adapt them to specific country conditions. Although most professionals in the aid business know this at an intellectual level, when faced with project deadlines, time constraints, and logistical difficulties of providing technical assistance -- both the providers and recipients fall into this trap of simply just putting “something” in place. For example, we have observed technical assistance projects such as computerizing accounting procedures that are supposed to streamline and simplify public financial transactions. These activities are supposed to detect and deter embezzlement and other forms of financial fraud. However, when the focus has been mostly on the hardware and software of such assistance without due attention to personnel training needs, the computerized system falls into disuse or creates even more disorder and confusion.

Second, lasting reforms involve often what may seem to be unglamorous, tedious work. For instance, many anti-corruption advocates suggest that countries begin their campaigns with a national integrity workshop. And this is absolutely crucial. These types of workshops mobilize interest, publicity, often involve international participants, etc. But when it comes to implementing the recommendations, such as rewriting regulations, manuals, disseminating policy changes, and training of staff -- these activities can take a very long time and often higher levels of resources than were anticipated initially. It is often at this stage that reforms become derailed. There needs to be constant, long-term monitoring of these types of "housekeeping" activities in order for them to be completed. This is what building up sound public administration is all about.

Third, some micro-level anti-corruption prescriptions may have unintended consequences or simply not thought out properly. For example, the introduction of user fees for certain services that were very bribery-prone may result in unfair discrimination of certain population groups. Often, the knee-jerk reaction is to roll-back the reform measure rather than refining it to filter out these types of distortions.

The administrative difficulties should not be overlooked as they are, in some measure, somewhat easier to control than mobilizing political will.

Lessons to be Learned

So what can be learned from these reasons for “failures” of anti-corruption crusades? Here, I use the word “failure” carefully, in the sense that “failure” can be the step just before success, if turned around properly.

At the political level, anti-corruption crusades have to have genuine commitment from leaders, be protected from being politicized, and be inclusive of and participatory for all stakeholders of a society. At the concrete level, this means that countries must devote adequate resources and time and appoint the right people to mount a successful crusade. They may want to organize policy dialogues where the major stakeholders are invited to the table to air their views and forge a consensus on the way forward. We observed such a policy dialogue in Namibia in 1998, where two years of intense consultation around the country culminated in a national consultative conference in
Windhoek. Some very concrete proposals for action resulted, which will be hard for the government to ignore.

At the administrative level, anti-corruption campaigns must take into account the unique conditions of a country before introducing solutions tried elsewhere. The solutions, once appropriately adapted, must be applied and implemented over long term, in a consistent way, with proper monitoring. In the event that unforeseen consequences result, careful reassessment and adjustments have to be made rather than a wholesale abandonment of the activities.

These observations are a part of the holistic approach that the United Nations has been advocating in combating and preventing corruption. An anti-corruption crusade in the sense of only paying lip service to dealing with the problem may address the symptom of corruption but not the underlying causes. Nor is focusing mainly on enforcement helpful since the damage of corruption will have already taken place. The key to successfully tackling corruption is the complementarity and synergy of both preventive and enforcement approaches. In addition to the political and administrative dimensions that I mentioned before, we could also add legal, social, and economic aspects.

Legally, clear and enforceable provisions in the criminal code, the civil service legislation, and administrative procedural laws should spell out what constitutes corruption and accompanying punishments. These legal provisions should be enforced by adequately resourced executive, judicial and independent institutions.

Socially, both those within and outside of government should adopt a culture of non-tolerance of corruption through clarification of values and standards. Such a culture comes about over time through professional training and civic education. And such a culture implies a more open and transparent society where the media is free and independent to investigate and report on government performance and demand accountability.

Economically, a system of incentives that rewards good conduct and penalizes corrupt or unethical behaviour will contribute to reducing petty bureaucratic corruption. Even at the society level, unless people can attain a minimum living standard through their employment, survival corruption will take place.
The Role of the United Nations

The role of an intergovernmental organization such as the United Nations is not to solve problems at the country level. That task is left up to the governments and citizens of the country concerned. But the United Nations can and does promote the exchange of experiences with the view for its member states to set standards and benchmarks against which they can measure progress. And as I mentioned previously, we can also provide technical advice upon request.

At this juncture, I would like to quickly mention two of our major initiatives which fall within this approach. The first is the African Public Service Charter and the second is a major comparative study of Public Service Ethics in Africa.

The African Public Service Charter is a model charter and code of conduct for public officials for the region of Africa. Once it has been adopted, the Charter and Code will serve as a reference tool for the countries in the region to introduce or improve their public service charters and codes. These activities are intended to assist in setting standards and implementing them to prevent public officials from soliciting bribes and engaging in other forms of corruption.

The comparative study on Public Service Ethics in Africa, focuses on Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda. The aim of the study is to get a “snapshot” of the state of public sector ethics policies and programmes in the region, through a sample of countries representative of the geographical, linguistic, and administrative diversities. The comparison of such a sample focuses on any regional gaps and best practices, providing a basis for the countries to evaluate and take action on the day-to-day implementation of their existing legal and administrative measures. Such a study also assists governments, their development partners, and the general public to identify priority anti-corruption areas for intervention and financing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that anti-corruption crusades alone do not work. However, they should not be abandoned just because many of them have not had a lasting impact. Rather, my message has been that such crusades have to be part of a comprehensive strategy that takes a long term view to bring about reform and changes. Such a strategy should seek the buy-in of all segments of society in order to have a lasting effect. In these endeavours, intergovernmental organizations can have a role through brokering information about what other countries are doing and through direct policy and programme advice. We hope to have an effective part to play in future, successful anti-corruption crusades, at the national, regional, and global levels.

Thank you.