Corruption: Ten Ideas to Enhance Religious Engagement in Global Integrity Movements

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HIGHLIGHTS

Pinpointing corruption’s perils, measuring its gravity, and pursuing governance strategies and action programs are high priorities in contemporary development work. Over the past two decades, citizen outrage, increasingly channeled via social media, has spurred dynamic civil society movements with integrity as a focus. Fighting corruption and promoting good governance calls for pragmatic, technical approaches and effective organization. However, values, ethics, and morality must be involved. These developments suggest that religious communities and leaders should be part of anti-corruption efforts more they are today.

This brief highlights ways to engage religions in fighting corruption. It draws on the Berkley Center’s 2009 report on faith and good governance and on a December 2008 Global Ethics article: “Ancient and Contemporary Wisdom and Practice on Governance as Religious Leaders Engage in International Development.”

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THE GOVERNANCE AND CORRUPTION CHALLENGE TO DEVELOPMENT

The “C” word (corruption) used to be virtually taboo in development circles, but few foreign aid discussions today ignore its deadly impact on policies and programs. Corruption, especially when it is deeply embedded in a system, is symptomatic of poor governance, weak institutions, and failures in rule of law as well as leadership. Apart from wasting resources, corruption saps political will, erodes confidence in governments, and penalizes the poorest and most vulnerable. Concerns for corruption touch on the moral fiber and ethical standards of societies.

Procurement, accounting, and public administration rules and standards have always had honest and efficient public management as the goal. What is new is sharpened attention to the social and political failures that result in both mega corruption (kleptocracy, as with former DRC President Mobutu Sese Seko) and widespread, embedded petty corruption that engulfs entire societies. Also new are ideals of open government, where use of public funds is far more transparent, with mounting pressures on private and public actors to end their traditional acquiescence in bribery and other corrupt practices.

Newer tools to combat corruption include public “naming and shaming” and systems that make information available at the community level about services they are to receive so they can seek redress. Transparency International, Publish What You Pay, and the UN Global Compact reflect both global anti-corruption movements and purposeful efforts to bring about change.
WHY ARE RELIGION AND FAITH RELEVANT?

Social standards and public morality are central concerns for religious institutions. Yet, with notable exceptions, religious institutions are rather marginal in anti-corruption efforts. One reason for this is uneasy relationships between some civil society and religious bodies linked to disagreements over what constitutes integrity and the highest priorities. Religious institutions that lack clear transparency and standards of financial management may hesitate to go on the offensive. Many are poorly acquainted with the technical dimensions of anti-corruption programs. Anti-corruption campaigns may be viewed as unfair “ganging up” on poor countries and a distraction from core challenges like global inequality and flaws in global market systems. It is time to explore ways to engage the diverse institutions of religion more effectively in anti-corruption, integrity efforts.

There is ample common ground to build on. This common ground includes concerns about the harmful effects of corruption on very poor people, issues where churches are actively engaged (like extractive industries), synergies related to accountability and effectiveness of faith-run institutions and service delivery, and the potential to address widespread religious concerns about erosion of ethical norms in contemporary society. Religious institutions and leaders are often the most trusted group in societies with vast networks, infrastructure, communication capacity, and influence. Thus they could and should be powerful allies in broader integrity movements.

TEN POSSIBLE IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Assemble better information on what’s happening to combat corruption within different faith communities.

“Mapping” means learning about who does what, where, with what resources, and what impact. Information about faith leadership on integrity and governance is scattered, impeding experience sharing and network/alliance-building. Highlighting best practice and noteworthy gaps could help strategic planning.

Action: A quick but systematic survey of a range of institutions and approaches (for instance, two countries, a selection of faith institutions, and a sample of leaders) to test how useful information could be obtained. Then its usefulness and demand for findings could be assessed and ideas for further work developed.

2. Draw on theological dimensions and teaching.

A compendium of careful information about theological approaches to relevant ethical and religious efforts against corruption in governance could provide a resource for dialogue and communication. Closer examination of scripture and religious teaching could help build commitment and address common perceptions, for example that cultural differences explain or even justify corrupt practices. Different faith traditions and cultures bring shades of difference to interpretations of public morality and integrity but there are also strong common links (for example, “thou shalt not steal”).

Action: A modest project to commission theological reflections as the basis for a conference, series of conferences, or moderated web dialogue on links between corruption and governance and religious teachings.

3. An effort to mobilize global religious institutions, individually and collectively.

There is a largely untapped potential for the vast array of world religious institutions to be part of integrity movements and work. Religious institutional networks and infrastructure include volunteers, well rooted organizations, sophisticated and far-reaching channels of communication, and trusted leaders, from local community to global levels. Identifying better ways to communicate messages about anti-corruption work could help break communications barriers. Combining pragmatic experience and prophetic voice could happen in hundreds of institutions. With virtually all faith-linked organizations engaged in practical and prophetic work on social justice, a sharper focus on public integrity and good governance can be logical extensions of this work.
**Action:** Consult with leading institutions and spiritual leaders to establish a priority list of institutions where there is interest and capacity. Building on prior Vatican initiatives to address corruption and working with Tunisian faith leaders in preparation for the 2014 International Anti-Corruption Conference in Tunis are examples. Explore purposeful partnerships with global interfaith organizations like Religions for Peace, the Parliament of the World Religions, the United Religions Initiative, and IFAPA.

### 4. Tap into faith community capacity to assemble and interpret development information related to governance.

Probably the most powerful tool for fighting corruption is information: whether disclosure of assets by public servants, investigative journalist reports, public hearings, obligatory publication of public budgets, publicly available accounts and audits, public bid openings, etc. Anti-corruption work centers on transparency, which is inextricably linked to accountability. Faith communities and institutions have enormous capacity to gather and interpret local development information. The Africa Monitor, inspired and led by Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Winston Ndungane, is an example. Its aim is to monitor, publicize, and comment on development progress with particular reference to results compared to commitments. The Indian civil society movement Fifth Pillar (referring to freedom of information) is another example.

**Action:** Design two country level pilot programs involving a range of faith institutions to use different information tools like mobile phones, internet, congregational organizations, and faith media to enrich national anti-corruption efforts. Link them to global development priorities like school enrollment, student performance, health service delivery, maternal mortality, and domestic violence.

### 5. Work with faith-linked educational institutions and programs to address corruption issues.

There is good potential to build on education programs and institutions to advance good governance. Faith institutions play significant roles in many dimensions of education, with extensive school networks, Sunday or Friday religious education classes, and influence on many public school curricula. Since appreciation of what works in fighting corruption requires knowledge, sharper focus in education programs can potentially raise the bar.

**Action:** Identify several ongoing programs, case studies, and best practices that teach ethics effectively at different levels that could serve as models. Focus on curricula in faith-run schools and direct and indirect contributions to teaching values in public school systems. Identify existing programs or opportunities to address corruption and governance in the curricula of theological training institutions. Design and conduct workshops on governance to equip faith leaders and communities with better tools and foster more active engagement. Develop online courses geared to faith communities about governance and corruption.

### 6. Establish integrity within faith communities and programs.

To preach and teach well about corruption, one’s own affairs must be in order. This applies equally to faith leaders and communities. Accounts, audits, and reports of many organizations, especially but not exclusively small institutions, are often fairly rudimentary. Some religious communities view requirements as bureaucratic measures that detract from program delivery. With demands by development agencies for adherence to strict procurement, monitoring, and reporting practices, this is an obstacle to partnerships, especially in cases regarding HIV and AIDS programs.

**Action:** Identify best practice transparency examples within faith communities (practical, adapted accounting and reporting formats). Corruption-proofing faith-run programs could help overcome religious leader reticence about anti-corruption efforts.
7. Engage faith communities in poverty monitoring and public sector expenditure reviews.

Faith institutions in several countries engage actively in processes to develop poverty reduction strategies and monitor their implementation, bringing them close to key policy decisions on poverty and social spending, and thus to governance and anti-corruption. Much can be done to expand this engagement and make it more effective. At the global level, monitoring the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and communicating what they mean can enhance governance efforts. As post MDG goals are formulated, faith actors can contribute to weaving governance and anti-corruption themes into the framework and specific goals and targets in constructive ways.

**Action:** Expand the UN led group defining post-2015 goals to include faith leaders. Identify meaningful national efforts. Develop teaching case studies.

8. Integrity, ethics, and accountability.

Focusing too narrowly on fighting corruption can cast a negative aura around broader efforts to ground development programs in ethics, accountability, and integrity. Institutional ethics programs designed solely in terms of government spending, procurement, and conflicts of interest rarely garner public enthusiasm.

**Action:** Identify and develop (with pragmatic faith leaders) action programs on the relevant ethical dimensions of two central development issues, for example maternal health.

9. Address governance through specific issues where faith communities are involved.

Acting to address specific problems offers a potential avenue for action that can bring faith leaders into advocacy and action alliances. Work on extractive industries (mining, above all) is a good example.

**Action:** Ensure that the Bretton Woods Project/ICCR work on extractive industries highlights corruption and governance issues in its action measures.

10. Link action from above and below.

Good governance is about individual ethics and systems and it involves both local and global issues. Leadership (“fire from above”) is essential, but so is local action. Faith communities can play major roles as community actors on issues like malaria, and monitor development work at national and global levels.

**Action:** Develop case studies that link global and local issues and involve faith leaders and communities (in Malawi, Honduras, and Georgia, for example).

The complete Berkley Center/World Faiths Development Dialogue 2009 report on faith and good governance is available at: http://repository.berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/GovernanceFinal.pdf.

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ABOUT THE WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

The World Faiths Development Dialogue works to build bridges between the worlds of faith and secular development. Established at the initiative of James D. Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank, and Lord Carey of Clifton, then archbishop of Canterbury, WFDD responds to the opportunities and concerns of many faith leaders who have seen untapped potential for partnerships.