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Finding the will to end corruption and poverty

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Global and African policymakers cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the corruption that keeps many Africans perpetually poor.

Being poor does not only mean falling below a certain income line. Poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is often characterized by a series of different factors, including lack of access to essential services (health, education, sanitation, etc.), basic civil rights and human development. Corruption exacerbates these factors, undermines an individual's human rights and weakens the legal frameworks intended to protect the poor. In several African countries where governments make policies with little accountability for their actions, unequal development and poverty are fostered. People who lack opportunity become more disempowered (politically, economically and socially) and, in the process, further impoverished.

In a corrupt environment, wealth is captured by a few, income inequality is widespread and a state's capacity to attend to the needs of the poor is diminished. For citizens, these outcomes that leave many trapped in poverty and stall development often force the poor to rely on bribes and other illegal means in order to access basic services. As warned by the World Bank, corruption is "the greatest obstacle to reducing poverty." Growing socio-economic inequality causes the loss of confidence in political leaders and public institutions. And social instability and violence increase because of inequality.

Cause-and-effect

Part of the reason efforts to reduce poverty in Africa have hardly produced the desired results is due to pervasive corruption that exists in most public and private institutions on the continent. Across different country contexts, corruption has been a cause and consequence of poverty. At the same time, corruption is a by-product of poverty. According to American business and technology news website, Business Insider, the top 15 most corrupt countries in the world are Somalia, North Korea, Afghanistan, Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Iraq, Turkmenistan, Syria, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, Haiti, and Guinea Bissau. About half of them are located in Africa, with most of them considered to be the poorest countries in the world. Interesting enough, oil-producing countries are also on the list.

The prevalence of corruption also means that the services people depend on – from drinking water to health clinics –are degraded in quality or insufficient to meet society's demand. Corruption siphons off monies needed to improve them while also distorting policy decisions, such as where roads and schools are built. The 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals to halve poverty has practically approached. But the targets very likely would not be met. And corruption in governments and businesses would be the leading cause of the underachievement of this MDG.

According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer, corruption hits poor people hardest, with devastating consequences. The survey argues that a bribe demanded by a police officer may mean that a family can't afford school fees or even food to eat. Findings from Mexico, for instance, show that the typical poor family spends one-third of their income on bribes.

In a 2013 article, Huguette Labelle, former Chair, Transparency International, wrote: *"Eight times more women die having children in places where more than 60 percent of people report paying bribes, compared to countries where bribery rates are less than 30 percent. That's 482 women dying for every 100,000 births in more corrupt countries, compared to 57 deaths where bribery is less. The rate goes down to less than 10 deaths per 100,000 in many developed countries. The effects of corruption are personal and they are devastating. Corruption leaves children without mothers, families without healthcare, people without food, the elderly without security, and businesses without capital."*

Rising inequality

In Africa alone, Transparency International indicates that about 80 percent of the population lives on less than US$2 a day. Corruption is one factor perpetuating this state of poverty. Poverty and corruption combine to force people to make impossible choices such as deciding whether they buy food for their family today or pay a bribe to get treated at the clinic. Poor people often have low access to education and can remain uninformed about their rights, leaving them more easily exploited and excluded. In order to fight against their social exclusion and marginalization, poor citizens need a space for dialogue with the authorities.

As argued by Chrystia Freeland, a Canadian international finance reporter at Thompson Reuters, in her book *Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super-Rich and the Fall of Everyone Else"*, there has always been some gap between rich and poor in every country around the globe, but recently what it means to be rich has changed dramatically. Forget the 1 percent. Plutocrats have proven that it is the wealthiest 0.1 percent who is outpacing the rest of us at breakneck speed. Most of these new fortunes are not inherited; instead they are amassed by a rapacious political class and buccaneering businesspeople that see themselves as deserving victors in a cutthroat political and commercial system. Freeland discusses the consequences of concentrating the world's wealth into fewer and fewer hands.

According to a reviewer on Amazon, Vanessa Bush, the question Freeland raises is *"whether the gap between the superrich and everybody else [is] the product of impersonal market forces or political machinations? ....She draws parallels between current inequality and the Gilded Age of the late 1800s, when the top 1 percent of the U.S. population held one-third of the national income. Globalization and the technology revolution are the major factors behind what she sees as new and overlapping gilded ages: the second for the U.S., the first for developing nations. Drawing on interviews with economists and the elite themselves, Freeland chronicles lavish parties, hubris, and hand-wringing over the direction of the global*

economy. As she laments, the feedback loop between money, politics, and ideas is both cause and consequence of the rise of the super-elite."

A publication by the Center for Gender in Global Context at the Michigan State University states that *"Corruption, both in government and business, places heavy cost on society. Businesses should enact, publicize and follow codes of conduct banning corruption on the part of their staff and directors. Citizens must demand greater transparency on the part of both government and the corporate sector and create reform movements where needed."*

Institutionalized corruption

The economic system that has shaped the current form of globalization in the past decades requires further scrutiny. It has created conditions whereby corruption can flourish and exacerbate the conditions of people around the world who already have little say about their own destiny.

It is difficult to measure or compare the impact of corruption on poverty against the effects of inequalities that are structured into trade agreements, structural adjustment policies, and so on. The reality is that corruption and crime generate a lot of poverty around the world, especially among the least developed countries (LDC), where the great majority of them are located in the African continent.

To identify corruption is not difficult. However, it is harder to see the layers it can have, especially under the more formal, even legal forms of corruption. It is easy to assume that these forms of institutionalized corruption are not even an issue because they are often part of the laws that govern national and international systems. As a result, we tend to be accustomed to them.

At the same time, petty corruption saps the resources of poor people by forcing them to offer bribes in exchange for access to basic goods and services – many of which may be free by law. With few other choices, poor people may resort to corruption as a survival strategy to overcome the exclusion faced when trying to go to school, get a job, buy a house, vote or simply participate in their societies. Consequently, the cost of public services rises to the point that economically deprived people can no longer afford them.

Combating poverty and corruption, therefore, means addressing and overcoming the barriers that stand in the way of citizen engagement and a state's accountability. While most African nations claim that the equal participation and rights of citizens exist, in reality they rarely apply to the poor. Hence, to be effective, pro-poor anti-corruption strategies must look more closely at the larger context that limits opportunities for poor citizens to participate in political, economic and social processes.

Political participation and accountability

Corruption in the political sphere attracts growing attention in more and more LDC countries.

Fortunately, the demand for the accountability of political leaders and the transparency of political parties in the African continent has begun to trigger reform in those areas, where Ghana is an example. Established in 1999, Ghana Integrity Initiative (GII) is a non-partisan, non-profit civil organization focused on addressing corruption. GII is the Ghana Chapter of Transparency International.

Linking the rights of marginalized communities and individuals to more accountable governments is a fundamental first step for developing a pro-poor anti-corruption strategy. Citizens giving their governments the power to act on their behalf can shape a country's policies. By strengthening political accountability, policies will ensure that the poor are seen not as victims but rather as stakeholders in the fight against corruption. For now, a consensus on how to strengthen these elements in practice seems to still remain elusive within development cooperation circles.

Notwithstanding, despite large differences in the problems prevalent in many African countries and the existing remedies, recent efforts to prevent corruption target similar areas across the continent. Most countries that have endorsed the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Anti-Corruption Action Plan, for example, attribute an important role to administrative reform. Hence, the various strategies to prevent corruption address integrity, effective procedures and transparent rules.

The integrity and competence of African public officials are fundamental prerequisites for a reliable and efficient public administration. Many countries in Africa should make sure to adopt measures that aim to ensure integrity in the hiring and promoting of staff, provide adequate remuneration and set clear rules of conduct for public officials.

Conclusion

Global and African policymakers cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the corruption that keeps many Africans perpetually poor. Nelson Mandela, a man who was recognized around the world for his values of inclusiveness, hope and the centrality of human dignity, is a reminder to us that improving the lot of everyone in our society should always be at the center of our work. More than ever before, we must now commit to enter the next phase of the drive to eradicate extreme poverty; we must find the will to put an end to corruption.

Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya is the largest slum in Africa

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