

Africa after the Africa Commission:

What priorities for the German G8?



Opinion

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Combating corruption in Africa: What can donors do?

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‘Without progress in governance, all other reforms will have limited impact.’ (The Report of the Commission for Africa)

The Report of the Commission for Africa (CFA, 2005) diagnosed poor governance as the single most significant developmental challenge besetting the region. ‘Without progress in governance,’ it stressed, ‘all other reforms will have limited impact.’ The report also identified corruption as a central concern: the widespread prevalence of corruption undermines efforts to improve governance, and yet improved governance is essential to reduce the scope for corruption to begin with.

How can African countries break away from this vicious circle? The Commission’s report highlighted several measures that developed countries need to take at the international level to curb corruption. These range from strengthening NEPAD’s Africa Peer Review Mechanism to repatriating looted assets, to endorsing anti-corruption conventions. The CFA emphasised in particular the need for countries in the developed world to ratify the UN Convention against Corruption (2003) – the first international legal instrument to recognise the need for all states to commit to asset repatriation. In fact, one of the targets set at the G8 Gleneagles Summit was for all G8 countries to ratify the Convention by July 2007 (as of January 2007 Germany, Japan, Italy and Canada still had to do so).

But the Commission was considerably less concrete about what the international community can do about corruption at the country level. The report rightly argued that ‘governance is first and foremost a responsibility of African

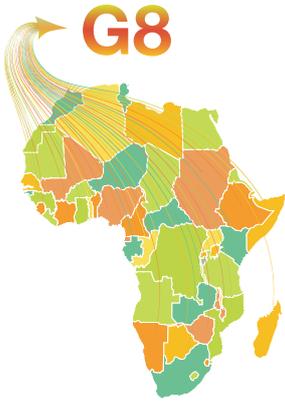
countries and people’. Yet is there a role for donors to support internal anti-corruption processes and domestic demands for enhanced accountability and transparency? What can donors do, and what should they avoid doing?

Above all, donors should remember that, while many actors (among them the international assistance community, the public, affected citizens) may not like corruption, not liking it and being able to do something about it are two very different things.

With this in mind, below are a few reflections on some dos and don’ts for donors.

Don’t adopt a dogmatic approach toward the fight against corruption. This involves developing a more nuanced understanding of corruption. Significantly, not all forms of corruption are equally corrosive to developmental efforts, and corruption in itself does not pose an insurmountable obstacle to development. The fact that some countries have been able to thrive despite high levels of corruption (think of China and Vietnam, or even Bangladesh) does not make corruption any less unsavoury or burdensome – especially among the poor and the marginalised. On the other hand, it does suggest that an anti-corruption approach based on ‘principled pragmatism’ may be more fruitful than one based on overly idealised and demanding standards. This entails designing anti-corruption measures that are more strategic, context-specific, and tailored to bring about

These Opinions have been written for a high level policy forum bringing together senior DFID and NGO staff, MPs, private sector representatives, Africanists, development academics, and key journalists for discussion on the future of Africa in the run-up to the G8 meeting in Germany (6-8 June). The Forum was held on May 2nd, 2007 in London.



specific improvements in the areas that are most needed.

Don't neglect the political factors underlying corruption (and governance more broadly) and engage with these socio-political structures, norms and incentives more directly. Undoubtedly, there is a growing awareness among donors that they need to develop a deeper understanding of local political processes and of the frameworks of incentives within which stakeholders operate. Studies like DFID's Drivers of Change and Sida's Power Analysis aim to do just that – their challenge lies in being able to translate the lessons learned into realistic practice. Nevertheless, in general donors tend to shy away from grappling with political factors more directly. They prefer to address challenges such as corruption and poor governance from a technical perspective, without delving into the deeper political and social structures that help recreate poverty and undermine development.

Be aware of the challenges as well as the opportunities of democratisation. Since the 1990s, Africa has experienced a growing tide of democratisation. Most of the countries in the region have undergone political reform, and many have held elections. Both NEPAD and the Commission for Africa view democracy as an essential factor in improving governance and combating corruption in the region. Donors themselves have considerably increased their democracy assistance efforts with the expectation that democratic reforms will lead to lower levels of corruption and improved governance.

In principle, there are good reasons to believe that greater democracy will lead to improved governance. Regular elections, a system of checks and balances, and a society free to organise provide important mechanisms and/or incentives for politicians to deliver and be held accountable for their actions. In practice, however, these assumed benefits of democracy do not emerge naturally. In Africa (as well as elsewhere), incomplete processes of democratisation have led not to consolidated democratic systems but to the emergence of 'hybrid regimes'. In many cases, corruption has either increased or become more visible once democratisation processes have been set in motion. This is particularly evident in the area of electoral politics, where campaign corruption scandals are uncovered regularly. In addition, political leaders in these hybrid regimes have been able to manipulate anti-corruption efforts to discredit and even persecute their opponents (Kenya and Nigeria, for example). This suggests a serious need for political party and campaign financing reform, as well as for greater caution in approaching corruption in democratising settings.

Resources

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www.ids.ac.uk/ids/aboutids/events/dsa_policy_forum.html

www.odi.org.uk/events/G8_07/

Building on the above, **develop a holistic and long-term approach to anti-corruption efforts** that is based on increased accountability and transparency. Oversight institutions and checks and balances mechanisms play an essential role in the fight against corruption because they can and do help to keep the behaviour of political leaders under check. Especially in democratic systems, citizens can vote politicians out of office if they are dissatisfied with their performance. However, as highlighted above, in the African context democratic structures are still incipient and institutions promoting horizontal as well as vertical accountability remain weak.

As part of their democracy assistance, donors have engaged in multiple efforts to strengthen civil society and the media, both of which can play an essential role as watchdog organisations. Donors have also undertaken substantial work in the area of judicial reform and the rule of law, as well as decentralisation. There are, however, other institutions and mechanisms which donors have tended to neglect but that deserve greater international attention as potential avenues to combat corruption and promote better governance. Parliaments and political parties are perhaps the most obvious. Freedom of information (FOI) laws are also important. While 53 FOI laws have been enacted over the past 15 years, mostly in the developing world, Africa as a whole lags behind other regions in terms of passage of this kind of legislation. Only Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe have FOI laws (with one pending in Mozambique). Donors should adopt a more concerted and united approach than has thus far existed towards encouraging the passage of FOI laws in Africa, and they should work closely with domestic supporters of such reforms to give them real teeth.

In addition, **establish simple standards of transparency** that require recipients of aid to make public information about how much assistance they have received and what that assistance will be used for. As the Report of the Commission for Africa highlights, '[o]penness makes it more likely that resources will be used efficiently.'

Finally, **evaluate more rigorously and systematically what works**, in terms of both anti-corruption initiatives and democratisation efforts more broadly. Despite considerable efforts and substantial resources from the international community to curb corruption and promote other democratisation and governance reforms, relatively little progress has been made in improving actual practices. Comparative evaluations and impact assessments of what works and does not work remain scarce. As a result, donors still have little guidance on what strategies may work best, and opportunities for sharing lessons remain limited.

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