

**The imperatives of better governance:
An ethical/religious lens on the fight against corruption**

G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Paper
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Abstract: No public policy topic is more discussed across world regions than the scourge of corruption. Corruption takes different forms in different settings but it fuels anger and cynicism everywhere. Corrupt practices of many kinds undermine efforts to advance on virtually any front, including fighting poverty, assuring security, addressing climate change, and supporting vulnerable people and communities. Fighting corruption thus belongs at the center of global policy agendas, as a moral imperative and a prerequisite for practical results. Religious actors can be powerful allies in the effort but are insufficiently involved. Why so? They can document and pinpoint the daily corrosive effects of corruption on poor communities and, building on shared ethical teachings, bolster effective action. To move forward, religious actors must address corrupt practices within their own communities; without such efforts they are crippled in contributing effectively and with trust to broader community, national, and global agendas. There are many priority, practical areas where focused action by religious actors can bolster integrity movements. Action can be global, national, and local, separate and in coalitions. Specific platforms include the global International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC) in Copenhagen in October 2018, UN Forums, and the G20 Summit in November.

The G20 Interfaith Forum in September 2018 urged G20 leaders to heed the insights of religious communities and commit to continuing engagement with broad civil society and private networks that include religious actors, as they act decisively to rebuild trust and integrity in governance and public services.

Contributors

Katherine Marshall, World Faiths Development Dialogue, km398@georgetown.edu.

Elias Szczytnicki, Religions for Peace

Fr. Seamus Finn, Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility

Amb. Alvaro Albacete, KAICIID

Christoph Stuckelburgh, Globethics

Peter Eigen. Founder, Transparency International

Inspiration

Pope Francis is among religious leaders who point to corruption as a greater ill than sin but also highlight that it can be avoided: “it demands the commitment of one and all.” Corruption undermines both the natural environment and human society, hanging like a dark cloud over progress in many countries. Shameful across cultures and religions, perceptions of widespread corruption feed the citizen disengagement and anger that help explain the appeal of both populism and extremism. Fighting corruption demands the engagement of all sectors of society, but perhaps of religious communities more than any others. They can ideally offer a moral compass and practical eyes and hands to help navigate the complexities of corruption in our modern era.

Facets of modern governance challenges

Corruption is as old as human societies. Widely held ideals and expectations that rule of law and notions of justice and fairness will govern societies speak to aspirations, shared across cultures, for honest government. This means prominently integrity and honest use of resources for the benefit of the governed. Global movements like Transparency International and the International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC) address the complex forces at international, national, and community and municipal levels that undermine good governance. They focus on traditional issues like bribery and political corruption as well as more modern topics like mass communications; social media, for example, works both for good and evil, interrupting patterns that permit elites to capture power, even as they can sow misunderstanding, misinformation, and strife.

Corruption is the enemy of democratic values and systems, of human rights, of human dignity, and of equitable, sustainable, thriving societies. Global and national drives towards accountability and integrity are shaped by several factors:

- Corruption is a *widespread, shared concern across the world*. A 2011 survey covering 23 countries (carried out for the BBC), found that corruption was the topic most frequently discussed by the public, ahead of poverty, unemployment, and rising costs. Nearly a quarter of those surveyed said they have discussed corruption recently and many rank it the most serious problem facing their society. **When people speak of ethics and politics, corruption is often the leading edge.** The myth that many societies accept corruption as a norm is patently false: people everywhere hate corruption.
- *National strategies to fight corruption systematically are relatively new* and important new tools and experience are available. Managing public procurement and finance and punishing theft have long roots but national approaches that look professionally and systematically at changing both public management systems and cultures that permit corruption are quite recent. Not long ago, mainstream economists and politicians often argued that corruption served as “grease for the motor”, acceptable within a culture. Such arguments are rarely heard today. Corruption is widely seen as an evil, a cancer that eats away at social cohesion, “sand in the engine”. Governments and nations are judged by their levels of integrity and quality of administration.
- We appreciate more clearly today that *meaningful efforts to fight poverty, assure security, and assure prosperous and equitable societies depend on public integrity*. Efficient use of resources is vital for delivering services like education and health. The damage to pension programs, social protection, quality education, and decent health care from corrupt systems go far beyond the direct damage inflicted because they erode trust. Businesses increasingly avoid investments in corrupt environments where governance is poor.
- *Democratic systems are threatened at their core by corrupt practices*. When young people see their societies as irremediably corrupt, the temptations of extremist promises have wide appeal. Likewise, populist and autocratic leaders feed on anger against corruption and the promise of strong, often authoritarian measures to right the society.

Religious leaders need to be concerned and involved

Religious leaders and communities should be central to efforts to end corruption. Ethics and action are their business and religious figures commonly enjoy respect and attention. Potential roles range from contending with personal responsibilities to the tenor and core values of a society and nation. Each religious tradition has teachings that speak to the core values of trust and honesty. These teachings have much in common, as reflected, for example, in the principles set out in the Global Ethic (articulated by theologian Hans Kung) and in many common calls of interreligious bodies and gatherings. Courageous religious leaders in exemplary situations speak truth to power about ethical challenges to governance that include corruption.

That said, religious leaders have yet to take on leading roles in the modern efforts to address corruption that constitute an international and national integrity movement. This is partly because the leadership of anti-corruption movements has become quite secular and technocratic in language and ethos. Moral issues tend to take second place, for reasons that include, for example, a desire to focus more on the systems that make embedded corruption possible than on personal failings and to avoid the political taint sometimes associated with religious involvement in public affairs. The focus on environmental factors rather than moral failings has also reflected the multicultural nature of global anti-corruption movements. As a practical matter, close relationships between governments and religious authorities can dampen criticism as can the precarious situation of religious actors in many settings.

The pendulum has swung too far in a technocratic direction. Corruption will not be defeated by technical means alone. Ethics, values, and morality must be part of the equation in strategic plans. Religious leaders should have clear roles to play, in speaking truth to those in power and in guiding individuals as they navigate complex choices, for example in how to combat corrupt practices they see or to avoid temptation to fudge rules or seek quick fixes. Religious leaders have central roles in articulating values and norms, including through religious education at many levels. Inter and intra faith alliances can look to the common good across society.

One explanation why some religious leaders are reticent to engage in anti-corruption efforts is awareness that their own organizations may not meet the highest standards of accountability. A tendency to view accounting and reporting as secondary matters is not uncommon. This obviously can and should change: there is no justification for tolerating careless oversight and use of funds and unethical management of personnel. With houses in order, religious institutions are well placed to demand high standards of their governments and leaders.

A further challenge is that many corruption issues are complex, with causes and consequences interlinked. Corrupt practices are linked to inequality among nations and within them, to the abuses of the powerful, to the underworld of trafficking and crime, and to concerns that social values overall are dominated by greed and uncontrollable market forces leading to a daunting erosion of morality. Conflict and corruption go hand in hand. None of these problems have easy solutions. Debates rage fiercely as to which matters most: mega-corruption –large-scale bribes and theft— or the widespread corruption that saps the trust and time of poor people when they try to obtain health care, succeed in school, register their child’s birth, or seek justice. Anti-corruption strategies

are complex as is judging performance fairly. Measuring progress is difficult; perceptions do not always fit well with objective reality. Even so, it is feasible and desirable to assure that anti-corruption measures are communicated in understandable terms and that accountability challenges are intelligently addressed. Partnerships and clear communication are vitally important.

What measures can religious actors take to advance anti-corruption efforts?

It is an assertion of faith, bolstered by examples from different times and places, that courageous and determined religious leadership can make a difference in turning societies around. Transnational and interreligious and cultural understanding and cooperation can play significant roles.

Religious institutions and approaches are infinitely complex but several common themes and questions offer a frame:

- (a) There specific and priority dimensions of corruption challenge where religious institutions and actors have special interest and comparative advantage. Apart from the imperative effort to address internal issues (abuse of clergy, sloppy accountability), social priorities stand out (care for vulnerable groups such as refugees, widows, and orphans, poverty, quality education, holding governments to account).
- (b) In the panoply of actors addressing corruption, religious institutions and actors have some specific gifts and capabilities that include:
 - Speaking authoritatively about what is right and wrong in their tradition or their society's traditions.
 - Mobilizing member to observe and report acts of corruption.
 - Institutionally, helping with the design, implementation, and monitoring of programs addressing public issues aligned with (a) above (e.g., schools, hospitals, social work...).
 - Communications media of certain kinds, building on trustworthiness, distinctive audiences, etc.
- (c) Examples of success can be documented to form part of broad narratives, where religious institutions have made a difference in fighting corruption.

The following suggestions look to defining promising areas for action.

1. Undertake, publish, and disseminate a *systematic review of pertinent teachings and texts* that relate to corruption. This would ideally take an interreligious perspective. The goal would be to identify and highlight specific texts responding to priority issues, drawing on individual traditions and highlighting common threads. This could help build commitment and address common misperceptions, for example that cultural differences explain or even justify corrupt practices. The work of theologian Hans Kung to promote the values-based "Global Ethic" exemplifies this approach. The annex points to a few examples of pertinent texts and highlight both common themes and the rich insights that can be drawn from a spiritual framing of issues.
2. *Pilot and exemplary anti-corruption initiatives and programs* that build on critical ethical values that bolster honest government. This could feature in religious education and could

form part of ongoing efforts to build religious literacy at different levels (from early childhood through professional training).

3. *Listen to specific grievances of vulnerable communities linked to corrupt practices, including as part of efforts to address extremist recruitment.* This could be linked to anti-poverty programs (Bolsa Familiar, for example) with a view to assuring that objectives are met and pointing to practical areas for improvement.
4. A closely related priority is *robust action to stop trafficking of women and children and patterns of abuse.*
5. *Build on ongoing efforts that address tangible topics like extractive industries* (where extensive religious initiatives are underway), identifying and promoting action on human rights violations, failures to assure protection of indigenous communities, and vigilant monitoring of environmental impact.
6. *Cooperate actively with promising integrity programs, for example at the municipal or community level;* youth prizes and support for women's initiatives are examples. Such efforts highlight what works and encourage promising efforts
7. With information and communication appreciated as powerful tools in fighting corruption, religious communities can have an impact by *focusing on governance topics through communication channels they manage and influence.* That means educational programs, radio, television, print, and social media.
8. Define specific efforts (initially at a pilot level) that support *robust monitoring and evaluation of initiatives and efforts to bring about change.* That means defining common, meaningful objectives and indicators of progress, that allow religious communities to contribute to broader community and national strategies.
9. Specific efforts to *support religious institution learning from the secular world in preventing sexual and financial abuses of many kinds.* Many industries and nonprofits are struggling with these issues and it would be feasible and useful to pull together promising initiatives for the consideration of religious institutions. Religious leaders themselves might call for dialogue to highlight area for secular religious collaboration that could open windows of opportunity.
10. Leading *interreligious bodies working together* can focus on understanding patterns of corruption, defining meaningful tools to combat them, and agree on specific priority areas for action.

Action in the G20 context, building on work at the September 2018 G20 Argentina Summit and potentially in the framework of Japan's hosting of the 2019 G20 Summit.

- Good governance should be a central theme of G20 Summits, with specific commitments to action and continuing monitoring.
- The framework of the [G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group](#) should be addressed with specific reference to religious actors and voices.
- The issues of land reform and extractive industries, including fisheries and rainforests, which are of special concern to religious communities, should be a focus of the G20 Communique, with commitments to active consultation with pertinent religious groups.

Possible next steps

These ideas need a time frame, committed actors, and specific audience

Annex: A Few Relevant Religious Texts¹

Buddhism

The Buddha discussed the importance and the prerequisites of a good government. He showed how the country could become degenerate and unhappy when the government becomes corrupt and unjust.

The Buddha once said, “When the ruler of a country is just and good, the ministers become just and good; when the ministers are just and good, the higher officials become just and good; when the higher officials are just and good, the rank and file become just and good; when the rank and file become just and good, the people become just and good.” (*Anguttara Nikaya*)

In the *Jataka*, the Buddha gave rules for Good Government, known as *Dasa Raja Dharma*:

1) be liberal and avoid selfishness, 2) maintain a high moral character, 3) be prepared to sacrifice one's own pleasure for the well-being of the subjects, 4) be honest and maintain absolute integrity, 5) be kind and gentle, 6) lead a simple life for the subjects to emulate, 7) be free from hatred of any kind, 8) exercise non-violence, 9) practise patience, and 10) respect public opinion to promote peace and harmony.

The Buddha further advised:

- A good ruler should act impartially and should not be biased or discriminate between one particular group of subjects against another.
- A good ruler should not harbor any form of hatred against any of his subjects.
- A good ruler should show no fear whatsoever in the enforcement of the law, if it is justifiable.
- A good ruler must possess a clear understanding of the law to be enforced. It should not be enforced just because the ruler has the authority to enforce the law. It must be done in a reasonable manner and with common sense. (*Cakkavatti Sihananda Sutta*)

Islam

“The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) cursed the one who bribes and the one who takes bribes.”

[Abd Allah ibn Amr ibn Al As, Abu Dawud, hadith no 3573]

“The Prophet (s.a.w.) has condemned the giver or receiver of bribe in decision making (ruler, management, judges etc...)”

[Narrated by At- Tirmidzi, 3/622: Imam Tirmidzi said: Hasan Sahih]

¹ Thanks to Robert Klitgaard

“And do not devour your property among yourselves by wrongful means, nor offer it as a bribe to judges, with intent that you may unlawfully swallow up a portion of other people's property, while you know.”

[Al-Baqarah:188]

“Woe to those that deal in fraud.”

[Al Qu’ran 83-1]

Christianity

“Corruption is something that enters into us. It is like sugar: it is sweet, we like it, it's easy, but then, it ends badly. With so much easy sugar we end up diabetic, and so does our country. Every time we accept a bribe and put it in our pocket, we destroy our heart, we destroy our personality and we destroy our homeland. ... What you steal through corruption remains ... in the heart of the many men and women who have been harmed by your example of corruption. It remains in the lack of the good you should have done and did not do. It remains in sick and hungry children, because the money that was for them, through your corruption, you kept for yourself.” Pope Francis, Audience with youth in Kasarani Stadium, Kenya, Nov. 28, 2015

“The World Council of Churches’ concern and response to the issue of corruption is founded on God’s preferential option for people in poverty. Corruption is rooted in and propagated by our prevailing economic structures, cultures and value systems” which are driven by “greed, relentless pursuit of power, profit and material gain by corporations, political bodies, administrators and individual actors. Confronting systemic corruption is therefore a matter of upholding God’s justice.” Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the WCC general secretary.