

A 2020 G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief

Governance and Accountability: Fighting Corruption in the COVID-19 emergencies

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Trust and Accountability: towards action

Trust and accountability are vital to address the COVID-19 emergencies, for governments, religious actors, civil society leaders, and businesses. Imperative steps include preemptive action to assure open and honest use of funds mobilized to support health interventions and to provide urgent services to vulnerable populations. G20 leaders, religious institutions, and communities can and should take concrete and transparent steps to this end.

The G20 Interfaith Forum has highlighted the importance of engaging religious actors purposefully in global anti-corruption alliances over several years, but the COVID-19 emergencies lend special urgency to the task. The 2019 recommendations from the G20 Interfaith Forum to G20 leaders urged that governance be a central theme of the 2020 G20 Summit, with specific commitments to continuing action to combat corruption and poor governance and to increase transparency, accountability, and protection for whistleblowers, and to facilitate the return of stolen assets. This should involve partnerships to broaden tools and coalitions that address corruption and reinforce values of integrity at the community, national, and global levels.

Corruption takes different forms in different settings, but it fuels anger and cynicism everywhere. It undermines efforts to advance on virtually any front, including mobilizing emergency responses to a pandemic, fighting poverty, addressing education priorities, acting on climate change, and supporting those who are most vulnerable. Fighting corruption thus belongs at the center of global policy agendas.

Religious actors can be powerful allies in the effort but are insufficiently involved. They can pinpoint and document the daily corrosive effects of corruption on poor communities and, individually and collectively, build on shared ethical teachings to bolster effective action. In contrast, their silence and acquiescence can abet corrupt actors, public and private. Religious actors need to be an integral part of addressing corrupt practices within their own communities. They can contribute to efforts to address corruption on community, national, and global agendas. Among priority areas for action are reinforcing values of integrity through religious and religiously provided education and forming strong partnerships with various integrity alliances.

The G20 Interfaith Forum in October 2020, highlighted the importance of governance issues across the full agenda as they affect prospects for health, peace, human development, and protection of the planet. G20 leaders need 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. A forthright focus on meaningful partnerships to fight corruption is an essential part of the goal.

With trust a central issue in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, three imperatives merit urgent attention: (a) assuring full transparency in development of vaccines and therapies, including on finance; (b) assurance of “corruption proofing” of funds mobilized for health services and to serve vulnerable populations; and (c) concerted efforts to address misinformation and hate speech.

Challenges

Perceptions of widespread corruption in national governments and international bodies feed the citizen disengagement and anger that explain in significant measure the appeal of both populism and extremism. Bribery is shameful and illegal in all cultures and it violates divine paradigms. Fighting corruption demands the engagement of all sectors of society, but with special applications for religious communities. Their roles highlight the strong moral compass and granular local knowledge needed to navigate the modern complexities of corruption. Hope and confidence are essential to assuring that fighting corruption is possible, with the will, good ideas, and persistence.

Pope Francis is among global religious leaders who have highlighted the ills of corruption, that undermine both the natural environment and human society, hanging like a dark cloud over progress in many countries. “Corruption can be avoided and it demands the commitment of one and all.” Religious leaders from many traditions echo similar calls. Action, however, falls far short of the rhetoric.

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. Surveys underscore the widespread expectation that leaders will serve as stewards of the people, with their direction inspired and guided by notions of human rights and democratic principles, which include integrity and honest use of resources for the benefit of the governed.

The COVID-19 emergency highlights roles of governance, trust, and accountability as citizen trust in institutions is a vital prerequisite for effective pandemic response. With massive funding mobilized swiftly, challenges of proper oversight and assurance of honest delivery take on special importance. Watchdog functions thus have particular urgency.

Global movements like Transparency International and the International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC) address the complex forces at the international, national, community, and municipal levels that undermine good governance and erode trust in institutions. They focus on traditional issues like bribery and political corruption as well as more modern topics like distortions through mass communications; social media, for example, works both for good and evil, interrupting patterns that permit elites to capture power but also sowing misunderstanding, misinformation, and strife. Corrupt practices accentuate disparities in access to services and contribute to exclusion including by race and religious affiliation.

Six elements shape global and national drives towards accountability and integrity:

- *Corruption is a widespread, shared concern across the world.* [A 2010 survey](#) covering 26 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 had discussed corruption recently and many ranked it the most serious problem facing their society. When people speak of ethics and politics, corruption is often the leading edge.

Contentions that many societies accept corruption as a norm are patently false: people everywhere hate corruption.

- *An essential, foundational element of good governance, sorely lacking in many countries, is the rule of law.* Strengthening weak systems must be a foundation for combatting corruption. Corruption corrodes the rule of law, which promotes impunity and undermines accountability. Specialized, independent mechanisms in the law enforcement and judicial areas with the mandate, training, and authority to be effective in tackling corruption in government and the private sector are urgently needed. This requires adequate legislation and cross border cooperation (missing in many countries) and effective implementation mechanisms. Combatting corruption in the private sector requires strong compliance regimes, backed by criminal sanctions, strong whistleblower protection, and incentives and protection for justice collaborators.
- *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.
- *National strategies to fight corruption systematically are relatively new.* Managing public procurement and finance and punishing theft have long roots but seeking a national approach that looks professionally and systematically at how to change both public management systems and the culture that permits corruption has taken hold quite recently. Not long ago, mainstream economists and politicians often argued that corruption served as “grease for the motor”, acceptable within a given culture. Such arguments are rarely heard today, and corruption is widely seen as an evil, a cancer that eats away at social cohesion. It is “sand in the engine”. Governments and nations are judged by their levels of integrity and quality of administration.
- *Meaningful efforts to fight poverty and assure prosperous and equitable societies depend on public integrity.* The 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.
- *Corruption thrives in environments of religious and ethnic intolerance that marginalize groups.* Discrimination makes groups and individuals vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of criminal mistreatment. Corruption of various kinds protects those who promote intolerance, incite violence against marginalized religious groups, or profit politically and/or economically from such conduct. Corruption undermines the protections that constitutions, laws, and international obligations provide for freedom of religion, belief, and conscience, freedom of expression, and legal protections from discrimination. Most countries have both national and regional legal frameworks providing such guarantees but lack effective implementation and accountability (i.e. rule of law), in significant part due to corruption and inadequate education on tolerance and ethical values.

Corruption, in short, is the enemy of democratic values and systems and of equitable, sustainable, thriving societies. It involves both examples and action by leadership (especially at the top), commitment to rule of law, and embedding relevant mores in society.

Religious Dimensions

Religious communities have the potential to enhance global and local action against corruption but face significant challenges in translating this potential into reality.

Action by religious as well as other communities is complicated by the vicious circles involved. For ordinary citizens (who for example hold low or mid-level jobs in government or the private sector) refusing to participate in corrupt practices carries high costs that they can ill afford to pay. Where corruption permeates every level of economic activity and interaction with governmental agencies, refusal to pay a teacher means your child is ignored in school and receives bad grades or may not be able to go to school at all. Refusal to provide gifts to police at the neighborhood station means your home does not receive protection. Refusal to provide a small bribe when submitting an application for services to a government agency can mean that your application languishes at the bottom of the pile for weeks or longer. Refusal to pay a bribe or a portion of one's salary to the boss who hires you can mean not getting a job. Such patterns go from the bottom to the top of the social, political, and economic pyramid.

For religious and ethical teaching to be effective, these dilemmas must be addressed. How can, for example, Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic religious values and communities help teachers and communities work together to stop this cycle within their community and beyond?

The moral responsibilities and authorities of religious leaders and communities point to central roles in fighting against corruption. This applies at different levels, 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,¹ 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 modern efforts to address corruption as international and national integrity movements. 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 reflects the multicultural nature of global anti-corruption movements. As a practical matter, close relationships between governments and religious authorities can discourage criticism as can the precarious situation of religious actors in many settings.

The pendulum has swung too far in a technocratic direction. There is a growing recognition that 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. This speaks to the power of inter and intrafaith alliances that look to the common good across society.

A partial explanation of why some religious leaders are reticent to engage in anti-corruption efforts is an 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. 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, or register their child’s birth. Anti-corruption strategies are complex as is judging performance fairly. Measuring progress is difficult; perceptions do not always fit well with objective reality.

Anti-corruption measures can and should be communicated in understandable terms and accountability issues can and should be intelligently addressed. The challenge speaks to the vital importance of partnerships and clear communication.

Measures religious actors can take to advance anti-corruption efforts

Courageous and determined religious leadership can make a difference in turning societies around. Examples of approaches and actions include the following:

- (a) Ethical and moral teachings are a critical part of successful reform and religious teachings can provide strong positive elements in broader anti-corruption strategies. Effective use of pertinent scripture and religious teachings, both for individual traditions and in interfaith contexts, can build commitment and address common misperceptions, for example, that cultural differences explain or even justify corrupt practices.
- (b) Women working from religious frameworks are often ignored or overshadowed but can be a powerful force for change.
- (c) “Speaking truth to power” with courage and knowledge can give robust meaning to critical ethical values that bolster honest government, for example, core ethical principles and practices that build trust and social cohesion. Religious education can build religious literacy at all levels and promote civic values consonant with core religious beliefs.
- (d) Tangible topics like extractive industries offer good entry points. Identifying and promoting action on human rights violations and failures to assure protection of indigenous communities can bolster vigilant monitoring of environmental impact.
- (e) Robust action to stop the trafficking of women and children and patterns of abuse are intimately linked to corruption and its underlying drivers and represent a logical platform for religious and interreligious action.
- (f) Close attention to grievances of vulnerable communities is essential as is seeking redress and communicating with families and authorities. This has special relevance in addressing the temptations of extremist ideologies
- (g) Active cooperation with promising integrity programs is feasible, 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
- (h) Anti-poverty programs (Bolsa Familiar, for example) can help assure that social and political objectives are met with integrity.
 - (i) Information and communication are powerful tools in fighting corruption, and religious communities through communication channels they manage and influence can have an impact. That means educational programs, radio, television, print, and social media.
 - (j) Interreligious bodies working together can focus on understanding patterns of corruption, defining meaningful tools to combat them, and agreeing on specific priority areas for action. With common, meaningful objectives and indicators of progress, religious communities can contribute more to broader community and national strategies.
 - (k) In the current COVID-19 emergencies, faith actors and citizens of higher standing should work to amplify the voices of the more marginalized community members who more acutely feel the impacts of the pandemic.

Recommendations to G20 leaders and to religious communities

How can G20 leaders and engagement groups advance religious roles in fighting corruption?

- Priority should go to assuring full transparency and accountability in use of funds mobilized to respond to the COVID-19 emergencies. This includes active cooperation between religious communities, global integrity alliances, and institutions like the International Monetary Fund and regional organizations such as the European Union but also SADC and ASEAN.
- Good governance should be a central and continuing theme of G20 Summits, with specific commitments to action and continuing monitoring.
- 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.

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¹ Hans Kung, John Bowden. *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. 1998, Oxford University Press.