Thematic Paper

Perception of Corruption as a Tool to Prevent Corruption

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Context

Although countries strive to implement concrete measures as to prevent and fight corruption, perception seems to be much harder to change, i.e. it does not go in parallel with the activities undertaken and/or results achieved. The idea of drafting this paper is to shed light on certain important aspects of the ambiguous relation between perception and measures taken to combat corruption and to draft recommendations on how to use real achievements as a tool to enhance corruption perception in the countries of NCPA members.

The significance of various corruption perception indices is indisputable, but the issue is how to reconcile it with the actual activities and results in curbing corruption, especially in the countries which do face many challenges and have a broad room for improvement in that regard. Notwithstanding, even if a large percentage of the index sample believes that corruption is a problem in their country, it says little about the nature or amount of corruption that exists[1]. To that extent, negative perception should not be underestimated but rather used as only one of the indicators/sources to inform what is needed to be done in this area.

The objective is to make perception tools as much compatible as possible with the efforts and results anti-corruption bodies seek to achieve and place equal importance to the outcomes of those policies in relation with perception surveys[2].

Recognizing the value and need for various corruption perception indices, at both international and national level, the paper does not intend to challenge them but rather to identify the main concerns and recommendations for potential overcoming of discrepancy between perception and an actual state of play.

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[1]   Stephanie E. Trapnell, *User's Guide to Measuring Corruption and Anti-Corruption*, UNDP, 2015, available at: https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/anti-corruption/user-s-guide---measuring-corruption-and-anticorruption.html

[2]   Ramin Dadašov and Niklas Kossow, *Corruption Perception: how can we improve corruption measurements?,* European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State Building, available at: https://www.againstcorruption.eu/articles/corruption-perception-improve-measurements/

Methodology

Methodology used during the process of drafting the paper consisted of a desk (documentary) research of prominent experts and papers on the respective matter, also a questionnaire was designed specifically for this purpose, as well as discussions and conclusions indicated by NCPA members during the plenary sessions of NCPA.

Desk research was aimed at collecting and summarizing already existing data on the topic as to illustrate a broader perspective and outstanding issues, although the list of references is not intended to be exhaustive.

Based on discussions of NCPA members during the plenary sessions and the aforementioned objective of the paper, the questionnaire was designed with an aim to collect as many responses as possible as to structure them to be more of a practical rather than theoretical value. Thus, complementing the current findings and studies on the topic and creating a possibility for drafting a follow-up paper presenting the experiences in implementing the recommendations deriving thereof.

The questionnaire was distributed to NCPA members in October 2019 and at a later stage upon individual request with the questions related, inter alia, to the existence or non-existence of discrepancy between the corruption perception (both by experts and citizens) and the activities of the institutions in charge of combating corruption as well as the role of media, civil society and international partners in this area. Although limited number of NCPA members responded to the questionnaire, their responses confirmed the need to elaborate on this issue, and the significant contributions of potential recommendations, which NCPA members could implement as to use their efforts and results to improve perception in their respective countries.

Findings and Challenges

As recognized by certain NCPA members, the time is a particularly important factor, given that the impact of anti-corruption efforts is usually reflected in surveys or indices at a later stage in comparison to the implementation of anti-corruption measures. Namely, perception data may be a poor measure of changes in the medium term, as more time may be required for experience to translate into perceptions[3]. With that in mind, all respondents assessed the perception not to be better in their countries in comparison to the actual situation.

On the other hand, all respondents indicated that specific activities undertaken by the institutions in charge of combating corruption in their respective countries affect changing of perception of corruption, but as majority of them assessed it, only to a partial extent. As one of them pointed out, the activities of the government and other stakeholders directly affect the perception of citizens, negatively or positively, depending on their content, scale, and impact on their daily life.

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[3]   Elizabeth Hart, *Guide to Using Corruption Measurements and Analysis Tools for Development Programming*, U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2019, available at: https://www.u4.no/publications/guide-to-using-corruption-measurements-and-analysis-tools-for-development-programming

The significance of the whole-of-society approach has been confirmed by the majority of respondents, since they expressed a great interest of working with the media, civil society and international partners when it comes to corruption perception indices in their countries. This approach also pushes towards synergies among state agencies to avoid fragmentation of duplicity of activities.

Having said that, the success of the work of anti-corruption bodies may be misjudged if it is measured only through the indices. Being perception based they can over—or underreport the actual level of corruption in a country[4].

Consequently, a major concern in terms of the perception is that it could be the reflection of distorted truth. When perception-based and experience-based surveys were compared, vast discrepancies were found between the perception and actual experiences of corruption[5]. The additional challenge occurs due to the fact that certain aggregate indices are solely a ranking of countries and not assessing the national performance policies applied to fight corruption, however in the media and even for donors the ranking can be read as such a measure[6]. Examining perception has also a strong subjective dimension. Indicators have been based on expert or informed opinions, gathered, and arrayed with or against other perceptions and surveyed views[7]. Furthermore, since perception-based indicators focus precisely on perceptions, their reflection of reality depends on whether perceptions reflect reality[8], i.e. they might lack the objectivity and accuracy.

As is well known, perception can affect foreign investments, but at the same, it also applies to decision makers in the area of providing donor support to the reform efforts in the beneficiary

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[4]   Elaine Byrne, Anne-Katrin Arnold, Fumiko Nagano, *Building Public Support for Anti-Corruption Efforts-Why Anti-Corruption Agencies Need to Communicate and How,* UNODC, CommGAP, World Bank, 2010, available at:
https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/StAR/CorruptionWhitePaperpub31110screen.pdf

[5]   Stephanie E. Trapnell, *User's Guide to Measuring Corruption and Anti-Corruption*, UNDP, 2015, available at: https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/anti-corruption/user-s-guide---measuring-corruption-and-anticorruption.html

[6]   Christiane Arndt, Charles Oman, *Uses and Abuses of Governance Indicators*, OECD, 2006, available at: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/uses-and-abuses-of-governance-indicators_9789264026865-en#page43

[7]   Marie Besancon, *Good Governance Rankings: The Art of Measurement*, World Peace Foundation Reports, 2003, available at:
https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/wpf36governance.pdf

[8]   Per Botolf Maurseth, *Governance Indicators: A guided Tour,* Norwegian Institute of International Affairs,2008, available at: https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/279387/WP-754-Maurseth.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y

country. Donor conditionality[9] could present a serious constraint when the aid has been decided upon based solely on corruption perception.

Another disputed point pertains to the fact that perception could generate a "culture of distrust"[10] towards some institutions, making it even more difficult to present what has been done, as well as to involve all stakeholders in overcoming challenges in combating corruption and to achieve more progress. Not only that perception does not always reflect reality, but also it may reflect factors or concerns that are not necessarily about corruption and cannot distinguish between different types of corruption, nor corruption in different sectors[11]. This can be of particular importance when the perception is focused on certain areas, whereas the other ones, potentially even more prone to corruption, remain out of range. For instance, when it comes to perception of citizens, it is also often directed to the areas that they primarily have the contact with, which do not necessarily have to be the ones in which the corruption is prevalent.

In contrast, it is found few institution that take the focus out of perception measures. On that regard, the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) is one of the most prominent examples of an initiative based primarily on achievements, where evaluations are not about perception but they address the reality, i.e. concrete measures that countries have or have not implemented to counter corruption[12]. Moreover, GRECO emphasizes that perception of low levels of corruption must not lead to complacency, that all countries, irrespective of their position in perception indices, are required to take concrete measures to prevent and counter corruption as well as that perception of low levels of corruption and the reality of the measures countries take (or do not take) to prevent and counter it may not necessarily coincide. As GRECO further points out, relying on perceptions and underestimating the strength of preventive measures, leaves the door wide open to behaviors, which may very quickly turn into corruption[13].

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[9]   Fredrik Galtung, *Measuring the Immeasurable: Boundaries and Functions of (Macro) Corruption Indices*, Measuring Corruption, 2005, available at: http://www.anti-corruption.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Galtung-Measuring-the-Immeasurable.pdf

[10]   Melgar, Natalia, Rossi, Máximo, & Smith, Tom W., *The perception of corruption in a cross-country perspective: why are some individuals more perceptive than others?*.Economia Aplicada, 2010, available at:https://doi.org/10.1590/S1413-80502010000200004

[11]   Paul M. Heywood and Jonathan Rose, *Close but no Cigar: The Measurement of Corruption*, Journal of Public Policy, 2014, available at: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7b61/87d0b4be24f8e47f63679ad2ac2564ff7828.pdf?_ga=2.191364714.1590889625.1589834631-988259948.1589834631

[12]   Marin Mrčela, *High Level Opening Conference "Strengthening Transparency and Accountability to Ensure Integrity: United against Corruption"*, 2018, available at: https://rm.coe.int/bullet-points-marin-mrcela-sibenik-conference-15-october-2018/16808e689e

[13]   GRECO, *Anti-Corruption Trends, Challenges and Good Practices in Europe and the United States of America*, 19th General Activity Report, 2018, available at: https://rm.coe.int/19th-general-activity-report-2018-group-of-states-against-corruption-g/1680951d14

Recommendations (as per the relevant actors)

Drawing from the previous analysis, there are several actions found in the literature and the insights of the NPCA members that could be considered to expand the focal point from perception while addressing corruption strategies and communication with the public.

Individual action

1) Explain perception-based corruption indices to the public to avoid confusion and misunderstanding about what the ratings are intended to reveal[14];

2) Adopt a media strategy which will contain modalities of informing the media and explaining perception indices to them, but also anti-corruption measures implemented, corresponding challenges and further steps to be taken;

3) Conduct various types of researches, which compare perception and a real state of play in order to determine discrepancies and define recommendations applicable to the local context of each country; widely publicize the findings as to familiarize the public about the achievements and failures in fight against corruption as well as measures to be taken in the future;

4) Conduct regular awareness raising campaigns as well as educate the public about the results and what else needs to be done;

Collective action

5) By cooperating with the media and fully informing the public, anti-corruption agencies can correct the public perception of corruption, accurately represent their work and its successes, educate citizens about the negative effects of corruption on their everyday lives, and mobilize both citizens and the media to help the agency achieve its good governance objectives[15];

6) Extensively implement a whole-of-society approach, including relevant stakeholders at national and local level, as well as media and civil society;

7) Maintain regular and structured cooperation with media and civil society as to communicate achievements and real challenges in fight against corruption;

8) Foster international initiatives and exchange of best practices on the relation between perception and actual corruption;

9) Regularly inform the donor community about the achievements and challenges.

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[14]   ibidem
[15]   Elaine Byrne, Anne-Katrin Arnold, Fumiko Nagano, *Building Public Support for Anti-Corruption Efforts-Why Anti-Corruption Agencies Need to Communicate and How,* UNODC, CommGAP, World Bank, 2010, available at:
https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/StAR/CorruptionWhitePaperpub31110screen.pdf

Conclusion

Albeit the issue of perception dominates the field of corruption; its influence and deficiencies have continuously been subject of the thematic papers, possibilities and recommendations on how to reconcile perception and reality still remain a challenge, especially when it comes to practical solutions which could be implemented at both national and international level. This is why NCPA sought to provide an added value in already existing and greatly useful findings on this matter. On that hand, the focus was on NCPA's practical dimension, that is to say, identifying ways to enhance methodologies and measures to prevent corruption. On the other, this paper considers the fact that all anti-corruption bodies are first and foremost accountable to their citizens. Hence the need to overcome a discrepancy between the expectations and perception of the citizens and other stakeholders; as well as the actual mandate of the anti-corruption bodies; through individual and joint efforts in implementing the mentioned recommendations and incorporate them into daily activities of the NCPA members. Not only that this paper confirmed the necessity to touch upon this topic in much more detail, but recommendations deriving thereof demonstrated its complexity, bearing in mind that their scope addresses cooperation with various stakeholders in order to clarify the role of anti-corruption actors and, besides all other mechanisms, contribute to reinforcing public integrity. The respective paper is just a first step in this comprehensive process.

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