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Combatting Corruption Around the World

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Journal of Democracy

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 7, Number 1, January 1996

pp. 158-168

10.1353/jod.1996.0005

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Combatting Corruption Around the World

Peter Eigen (bio)

In the spring of 1990, representatives of the World Bank stationed in Africa met in Swaziland to discuss an urgent request articulated by African leaders in their famous *Long-Term Perspective Study*: “Support

better governance.”¹ As the World Bank representative in Kenya, I agreed to talk about corruption as a powerful enemy of good governance. I described its enormous reach and its crippling effect on social, economic, and political development. I then proposed a plan of action that had evolved from lengthy discussions with many colleagues and friends in Nairobi. Clearly, most people are against corruption. Why not, then, channel this opposition into the construction of an effective coalition promoting transparency? The timing was propitious: international corruption had reached crisis-level proportions, and many countries that were undergoing political transition were in desperate need of stronger integrity systems.

The initial reaction of the meeting participants was enthusiastic. It was agreed that the World Bank should develop an anticorruption agenda for itself and for its partners, the idea being that the absence of corruption is an important element of an environment conducive to development. I agreed to spearhead the initiative. Soon after the meeting, **[End Page 158]** however, doubts emerged about the Bank's readiness to take this step. Would this constitute a violation of the political abstinence prescribed by the Bank's charter, stirring up a political hornet's nest? Although there was much encouragement within the institution, it fell short of the consensus needed for the Bank to back such an effort. Yet some of us remained determined to take action. Something had to be done, and something could be done. At the end of the Cold War, the time was right.

Unable to act within an existing intergovernmental framework, and feeling a need to draw the private sector and other nongovernmental actors into the necessary dialogue, I and some of my colleagues decided to proceed with the venture independently. This approach had the added advantage of avoiding the scent of conditionality that would have come with the World Bank's playing a dominant role. We wanted a movement driven by the demand for transparency that was then emanating from a number of nations in the global South and East that were in transition economically, socially, and often politically.

In sounding out friends and colleagues, we received an overwhelmingly positive response from a wide cross-section of African society, including academia, the business sector, the media, and the donor community. Corruption had become so widespread that many people had come to accept it as an unavoidable fact of life. Yet underneath that outer resignation we found considerable hope that corruption could be eliminated—revealing the truth of the saying that evil thrives on the apathy of the good.

The initial working group arranged meetings in Eschborn (near Frankfurt), Kampala (Uganda), London, and Washington, D.C. Soon, supporters from other continents joined in the deliberations. Gradually, some fundamental concepts emerged: the organization would work alongside governments and citizens' groups and would focus on developing systems to fight corruption on a step-by-step basis. It was clear that there were no quick or easy solutions to the problem; the struggle would take years.

In early 1993, the nonprofit organization Transparency International (TI) was formally launched in Berlin. In discussions among more than 70 concerned individuals from every corner of the globe—including a newly constituted advisory council of more than 20 people—the initial resolutions of the founders were confirmed: TI's mandate, it was declared, would be to rid society of corruption, defined as the misuse of public power for private gain. In the South, such corruption derails well-intentioned economic-development projects. In the East, it undermines political and economic transitions before the benefits of more open systems can be experienced. The focus of TI, it was decided, would be on large-scale corruption affecting developing countries, regardless of the origin of the illicit transactions. **[End Page 159]**

It was also decided that TI would take a balanced approach, avoiding one-sided assignments of responsibility. Exporters from developed countries with strong anticorruption laws often conform to and even manipulate...



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