

Blowing the whistle on corruption

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‘What is the single biggest obstacle to eradicating extreme poverty?’ When Micah Challenge asked this question, they were rather shocked by the response - “Corruption”. Corruption is a huge issue in the world. It is a huge issue for the church today. Yet sometimes anti-corruption efforts are seen as a Northern donor agenda - simply another conditionality being forced on Southern partners. But challenging corruption is so much more than that. It is an intensely local issue. As Krishna Adhikari of INF Nepal says: *‘Corruption is a disease killing many people. It robs poor people and takes the bread of hungry children’*. (Digni Bulletin 2013 -2). I am convinced that the partners in the Global South hold the key to securing good governance and proper anti-corruption measures.

Whose agenda?

All too often initiatives to avoid financial and non-financial mismanagement (like corruption, fraud, theft or nepotism) can often be done merely to satisfy donors. After all many international NGOs are increasingly aware of their legal responsibility to ensure that money that they are given is used properly. In Norway the government has a stated policy of “zero-tolerance to corruption”. This is zero tolerance to all kinds of corruption - from the theft of one dollar from the cash box (often called petty corruption) to large amounts of systematic corruption (often called grand corruption). The Norwegian government gives \$30 million to us at Digni to finance the work of our members. If there is any mismanagement throughout the whole partner chain we are responsible.

Legally we cannot tolerate any form of corruption whether it is based on ‘need’ or ‘greed’. Some argue for us to be flexible in allowing funds to be used for purposes other than what was agreed in the project - like using the project vehicles for non-project benefit without paying a mileage fee, or paying and receiving per diem for workshops one could not attend for some other reason. But just because it is culturally acceptable (“*this is how we do it here*”) does not make it legally acceptable. Corruption is as much an issue in the North and the South. Politicians and companies in North America and Europe have been recently exposed for grand corruption. I am always pleased when partners from the South start questioning our Norwegian practices. This opens up for a two way dialogue on what is acceptable both ways and is a sign of an open and healthy partnership.

A local initiative

In reality we are just as accountable to the local community as to the Norwegian government and tax-payers. For example, local communities that have been involved in planning a water project expect that the resources will reach them and be used as effectively and efficiently as possible. It is in their interest that funds should not be used for anything but the agreed project. If there is any mismanagement then expectations and trust with the local community are damaged - sometimes irreparably thereby undermining any future development efforts.

We have seen some inspiring examples of local organizations starting their own anti-corruption initiatives. Not because the donor partners ask them, but because they respond to an expressed need at the grass-root level in their own local contexts. I am eager to see how these develop, and I hope and believe it will give fruitful and necessary contribution to how we partners in the Global North will

approach anti-corruption work in the future. In this way healthy partnerships can grow even healthier.

For example, one of Digni's members, Wycliffe, saw the need for a basic grassroots course in anti-corruption and good governance. With funding from Digni, they developed the course material with the input and testing by local organizations in several countries in Africa and Asia in addition to Norway. And the material is now being used by both Christian and secular organizations.

An OD response to corruption

OD can help organisations become more resistant to temptations of mismanagement.

OD can help organisations address four main areas of risk:

- 1) Motivation
- 2) Possibility (or opportunity)
- 3) Risk of discovery
- 4) Social acceptance

If we can deal with all these four then the risks of mismanagement should be close to zero.

Our partners in Asia suggested we add a fifth

- 5) Spiritual integrity.

They argued that although people could have motivation, have the possibility, with a low discovery risk where minor theft was socially acceptable - a person's spiritual integrity may still prevent the person from being corrupt¹.

Whistle blowing a blessing or a curse

One could write a lot on each of these five risks, but I will end by focusing on number 3 "Risk of Discovery". If I am the cashier, there is USD 10 000 in the cash box, I am the only person needed to open the cash box and I am the only one counting it, I know the auditor will not check it. Not only is there a possibility for me to run away with the money, but the organization has not put in place systems to deal with "Risk of Discovery".

While studies have shown that less than 10 percent of all cases mismanagement are discovered by auditors, close to 50 percent are discovered by persons who report about the mismanagement - people who 'blow the whistle' to get attention to a potential problem. Then it is up to the organization to investigate it and find out whether or not there has been any kind of mismanagement. A key principle is that whoever blows the whistle is able to remain anonymous avoiding the risk of exposure and punishment. But anonymity opens up the potential for abuse. It becomes a curse when the person who raises the issue is falsely accusing someone with whom they have a grievance. Or it may be an ex-employee complaining about their previous organization.

And yet despite the potential for abuse, it is still vital to give protection to whistle-blowers who have the courage and integrity to stand up to dishonesty. They are standing up for justice. It is a blessing. As Krishna Adhikari of INF says: *"Corruption stops support reaching those most in need... Standing up to corruption is a huge sacrifice requiring much courage. We should not feel ashamed and stay silent..."* But he goes on to say how important it is to examine

¹ I assume non-religious people would claim that "integrity" not necessarily has to do with faith, but as this came from our partners I am not at liberty to change what they said.

themselves first and remember that *“I must clean my hands before pointing out the dirt on others’ hands”*.