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Corruption is not a gap

Rethinking anti-corruption programming
in fragile settings



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What this brief argues

- Anti-corruption programming still largely begins with an OECD model of governance and measures the distance between it and the country in front of you. That criticism was made clearly two decades ago (Unsworth, 2007) and the operational agenda has moved less than the rhetoric.

- Corruption is better understood as a symptom of unresolved governance problems than as a discrete failing to be attacked directly — a position the OECD's own development committee adopted as far back as 2006 (OECD DAC, 2006).

- The standard remedy illustrates the problem. Anti-corruption commissions have tended either to lack teeth or to be turned on political opponents (Unsworth, 2007), because the institution is transferred while the political conditions that would make it bite are not.

- Where elites can finance the state from resource rents, aid and other non-tax sources, they have little reason to bargain with taxpayers — and bargaining over tax is where accountable institutions historically came from. Revenue structure is therefore an anti-corruption variable, not a separate fiscal one.

- That argument now has a live test. Aid to fragile contexts is falling, and in Somalia the authorities are working to have domestic revenue cover operational government spending by 2027 (IMF, 2025). The rent structure the 2007 argument described is changing in real time.

- The supply side remains where donors have the most direct control: their own procurement, their own parallel systems, money-laundering and beneficial ownership, and the transparency of extractive and timber revenues. These are things OECD governments can change by decision.

- Digital systems are becoming the new institutional transfer. A procurement portal or tax platform inherits the same question as an anti-corruption commission did: whose discretion does it remove, and what will that person do about it?

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Who this is for	Donors, governments and implementing organisations designing anti-corruption, public financial management and governance programmes in fragile settings.
What it covers	Why the diagnosis usually precedes the design badly, and what a better sequence would look like.
What it is not	An argument that corruption should be tolerated, or that anti-corruption work does not matter. It is an argument about what actually changes behaviour.

An argument made, and not yet operationalised

Nearly twenty years ago, a short brief for the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre argued that the key to more effective anti-corruption strategies was to think differently about governance: to stop starting with an OECD model and assessing the gap between it and the country in question, and to start instead with fewer assumptions and some questions (Unsworth, 2007).

Much of what that brief welcomed has since become orthodoxy. Corruption is now routinely described as a symptom of governance problems rather than a discrete offence. Country ownership and political commitment are standard language. Political economy analysis has moved from pilot to procurement requirement, and most large programmes now commission one.

What has moved less is the operational agenda. Programmes still tend to be built around institutional form: a commission, a law, a strategy, an oversight body, a transparency portal. The political analysis is produced at inception, noted, and set aside when the workplan is written. The brief's central complaint — that the rhetoric about politics does not connect to what programmes actually do — survives the intervening two decades largely intact.

This brief revisits that argument for fragile settings in 2026, and adds one thing the 2007 analysis could not have anticipated. The rent structure it identified as the root of weak accountability is now changing, in some places rapidly, because external financing is falling. That creates conditions the argument predicted would matter — and a test of whether it was right.

How this brief was prepared

This is a practice brief. It draws on Radar Consultancy's governance, public financial management and evaluation work in Somalia and the wider region, and on the published literature listed in the references. It presents no new primary research and evaluates no individual programme or institution.

What the 2007 argument said, and what has changed

The 2007 brief made four moves that are worth restating, because programmes still fail on each of them.

The gap model	Donor governance assessments examined performance against OECD models of market capitalism and liberal democracy, with corruption defined by a clean separation of public and private spheres that many contexts do not have (Unsworth, 2007).
The managerial assumption	A review of state capacity building in Africa found that conventional approaches assumed administrative weakness had managerial origins, when public administrators are embedded in an interdependent system of political institutions and social and economic interests (Levy, 2004, as discussed in Unsworth, 2007).
The bargaining account	Capable and accountable institutions emerged historically through interaction, bargaining and competition between holders of state power and organised groups – frequently violent, and centrally concerned with tax.
The rent problem	Where elites can finance themselves through resource rents, external military support and aid, the incentive to bargain with citizens weakens, producing states strong in relation to citizens and weak in capacity to make or implement policy.

Since then the diagnostic literature has caught up. The World Bank's *World Development Report 2017* made power asymmetries central, arguing that who bargains, who is excluded and what blocks entry to the policy arena determine which policies are selected and implemented, and that exclusion, capture and clientelism are manifestations of those asymmetries (World Bank, 2017).

WHAT HAS ACTUALLY CHANGED SINCE 2007

The analysis is no longer contested; it is quoted approvingly in strategy documents. What has not changed is the distance between that analysis and the programme logframe – and, in fragile settings, the persistence of the condition itself: nearly three-quarters of economies classified as fragile and conflict-affected have remained so for over a decade (World Bank, 2025).

Start with questions, not with a model

The gap model is durable because it is administratively convenient. It produces a list, the list converts into components, and the components convert into a budget. Starting with questions produces none of those things quickly, which is why it loses.

But the list describes a destination rather than a mechanism. Four questions do more work than an institutional inventory.

Why here?	What explains the pattern of corruption in this particular sector or institution — as against the general claim that accountability is weak?
Who is organised?	Which groups have the capacity to organise and engage government, and around which interests are they capable of sustained collective action?
What is negotiable?	Which of those interests are susceptible to bargaining and compromise, economic interests especially, as opposed to identity or survival questions?
What can outsiders move?	Which of these processes can external actors plausibly help or hinder — and which will proceed regardless of what a programme does?

The last question is the one most often skipped, and the one that determines whether a programme is an intervention or an observation. A great deal of anti-corruption programming is designed as though the external actor is the decisive variable in a contest between domestic interests, which it rarely is.

The gap tells you what is absent. It does not tell you why it is absent, or what would have to change for it to appear.

Corruption is a symptom before it is an offence

Treating corruption as a symptom of unresolved governance problems is not a softer position than treating it as a crime. It is a more demanding one, because it requires the programme to identify the arrangement that produces the behaviour rather than the behaviour itself. The OECD's development committee adopted that framing two decades ago, describing corruption as a product of an incomplete process of building an effective and accountable state (OECD DAC, 2006).

The standard remedy shows what happens when the framing is adopted in language but not in design. Anti-corruption commissions, transferred as an institutional form, have tended either to lack teeth or to be used to pursue political opponents (Unsworth, 2007). Both outcomes are predictable from the political settlement into which the institution was inserted, and neither is a capacity problem.

THE INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT ASSUMES	WHAT DETERMINES THE OUTCOME
An anti-corruption commission	That investigation and prosecution are constrained by capability	Who appoints and removes its head, who funds it, and whose files it is permitted to open
An asset declaration regime	That disclosure creates accountability	Whether anyone verifies the declarations, and what follows when they are false
A procurement law	That rules displace discretion	Whether the exceptions clause is used more than the rule, and who authorises exceptions
A transparency portal	That published information will be used	Whether an organised group exists with the interest and capacity to act on it
An audit institution	That findings produce consequences	Whether a parliament or a public exists that can compel a response

None of this argues against these instruments. It argues that each should be funded on an explicit judgement about the third column, and that where the answer in the third column is unfavourable the programme should say so at design stage rather than discover it at evaluation.

The revenue argument **now has a live test**

The strongest claim in the 2007 brief was fiscal. Governments that must rely on taxpayers for revenue have more reason to nurture growth and to build organisations capable of collecting and administering tax; being taxed gives taxpayers reason to organise and to demand an account of how the money is spent. Where elites can reach easier revenue — resource rents, narcotics, corruption itself, aid — that incentive weakens (Unsworth, 2007). A policy paper on taxation and governance for the OECD's development committee followed the same year (OECD DAC, 2007).

For two decades that was an argument about a counterfactual. In several fragile contexts it is now an observable process, because the external side of the revenue structure is contracting.

SOMALIA AS THE VISIBLE CASE

Debt relief at the HIPC Completion Point in December 2023 reduced external debt from about 64 per cent of GDP at end-2018 to under six per cent at end-2023 (IMF, 2023). The authorities are now working to a Medium-Term Revenue Roadmap under which domestic revenue would cover operational government spending by 2027, with a new Income Tax Law in force since 2025 and the 2026 budget financing social spending from domestic resources for the first time (IMF, 2025). Meanwhile the share of donor country-allocable assistance going to the most fragile contexts was at a two-decade low in 2022 and 2023 (OECD, 2025).

This is the condition the 2007 argument said would matter. It does not follow automatically that accountability improves: a state that taxes without explaining, or that collects coercively, can lose legitimacy rather than gain it. What follows is that the bargaining the argument described becomes possible, and that anti-corruption programming has an unusually concrete place to work.

DOMESTIC REVENUE ORGANISED TAXPAYERS DEMANDS FOR AN ACCOUNT CONTESTED BUDGETS

The programming implication is that support to revenue administration, budget transparency and taxpayer representation may do more against corruption over a decade than an institution created to prosecute it — and that the two should at least be weighed against each other rather than sitting in different portfolios.

The supply side is where donors control most

The 2007 brief made a point that remains uncomfortable: the measures most clearly within OECD governments' control are the ones acting on their own jurisdictions, businesses and financial systems — curbing collusion in corruption and money laundering, controlling the trade in small arms and conflict diamonds, and pressing for disclosure of payments from oil, gas and mining through the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. It cited the EU's forest law enforcement and trade regulation as an example of using co-ordinated bargaining power to change incentives in exporting countries (Unsworth, 2007).

These measures share three features that make them worth prioritising: they act indirectly but at scale, they can work with the grain of private interests rather than against them, and they are decisions OECD governments can take without requiring a partner government to agree.

There is a second supply side, closer to home, which donors control absolutely.

Their own procurement	Which local firms are enriched by programme contracting, on what criteria, and whether those criteria are published.
Their own parallel systems	Every parallel implementation unit removes a transaction from the public system and the scrutiny attached to it.
Their own predictability	Unpredictable, fragmented funding makes rules-based planning and budgeting harder, which is precisely what gives citizens entry points.
Their own fragmentation	Rationalisation of donor activity, not only harmonisation, was the ask in 2007 and is still outstanding.

An anti-corruption strategy that is demanding about a partner government's systems and silent about the delivery architecture sitting alongside them is incomplete, and is usually read that way by the counterpart.

Watch the new institutional transfer

Every era has an institutional form that travels faster than the conditions that make it work. In the 2000s it was the anti-corruption commission. In the 2020s it is increasingly the digital system: the e-procurement portal, the integrated tax administration platform, the biometric payroll, the beneficiary registry, the open budget dashboard.

These are often good investments, and Radar builds some of them. But they inherit the same question the commission inherited, and the question is not technical.

Whose discretion does this system remove, and what will that person do about it?

The predictable responses	Migration of the transaction to a channel the system does not cover; incomplete or delayed data entry; parallel manual records maintained alongside the platform; exceptions processes used as the default route.
The design implication	A system that removes discretion should be paired with an explicit judgement about where that discretion will reappear, and with monitoring aimed at the work-around rather than at uptime.
The ownership implication	A platform administered by a contractor, hosted outside the institution and dependent on external financing has not transferred control of the information, whatever the transparency claim in the logframe.

The honest version of the claim is narrower and still worth making: digital systems make certain kinds of discretion costly and certain kinds of evidence available. They do not settle who is willing to act on that evidence, which remains the question that decided the fate of the commissions.

Five questions worth answering first

None of these requires new research. Each requires a judgement to be recorded rather than assumed.

01 Diagnosis. What arrangement produces this behaviour, and who currently depends on it?	02 Revenue. Where does this government's money come from, and what would have to change for it to need its taxpayers more?
03 Organisation. Which group has the capacity and the interest to sustain pressure once our programme ends?	04 Our own footprint. What does our procurement, hiring and parallel delivery do to the incentives we are trying to change?
05 Consequence. If this instrument produces evidence of corruption, who is able to act on it – and what happens to them if they do?	
A programme that cannot answer the fifth question is funding the production of evidence without funding the conditions for a response. That may still be worth doing. It should not be described as fighting corruption.	

Low-key, long-term, and more likely to work

The approach argued here lacks the appeal of a direct campaign. It is slower, harder to photograph, and difficult to claim credit for. That was true when the argument was first made, and its author said so plainly (Unsworth, 2007).

What has changed is that the conditions the argument identified as decisive are now moving. External financing to the most fragile contexts is contracting. Domestic revenue programmes are running to dated targets. The rent structure that made bargaining unnecessary is, in some places, weakening on its own — not because a programme designed it that way.

That is an opportunity and a risk in the same movement. States under fiscal pressure can become more accountable to the people they tax, or more extractive towards them. Which of those happens depends partly on whether taxation is administered fairly and explained, whether budgets are contestable, and whether anyone is organised to contest them. Those are things external actors can support.

Anti-corruption work in fragile settings should spend less effort building the institution that punishes corruption, and more on the conditions under which someone is able to.

A NOTE ON SCOPE

This brief argues a position and generalises across contexts that differ in important ways. It evaluates no government, programme or institution, and makes no allegation about any individual or organisation. Fiscal figures are drawn from the published sources in the references and are subject to revision.

Sources cited

Sources are given in author–date form. Where a work is cited as discussed in Unsworth (2007), that is stated in the text; readers should consult the original before relying on it.

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