What is the problem?

Eradicating corruption is a wicked problem

The problem: High levels of corruption persist in many countries in spite of having adopted strong legal and organizational anti-corruption reforms associated with so-called international best practices.

The proposed approach: Rather than measuring gaps we need to look at how decisions and strategies of local actors are shaped in practice. This should be the departing point to developing a new generation of more effective, contextualized anti-corruption strategies.

The research agenda: Research at the Basel Institute on Governance focuses on uncovering and mapping informal practices and norms that drive corrupt behavior. It is not uncommon that unwritten rules are in practice more binding than the legal framework.

The research projects: Two projects investigate the role of informality in driving corruption from the perspective of political and business elites (top-down) and of average citizens (bottom up).

What are the findings?

Prevalent patterns of informal governance

Co-option is associated with strategic appointments into public office of allies and potential opponents, who are granted impunity in exploiting the power and resources associated to public office in exchange of mobilizing support and maintaining loyalty to the regime.

Control mechanisms are instrumental to manage clashes of hidden interests, ensure elite cohesion and enforce discipline of allies. Common examples involve the selective enforcement of anti-corruption prescriptions against opponents or renegades.

Camouflage refers to the manner in which co-option and control are hidden underneath institutional facades and policies consistent with a commitment to good governance and democratic accountability. Thus, punishment of a detractor may be accompanied by proclamations on the commitment to anti-corruption.

Informal Practices Top-Down

Informal practices among power networks of political and business elites promote elite cohesion, nurture bases of support and weaken opponents.

They are instrumental for regime survival.

They entail an informal redistribution of resources in favor of the networks of "insiders" at the expense of "outsiders", resulting in high levels of corruption.

Informal practices help win elections

Mobilise networks for political support

Deliver to constituencies (vote buying, takrima, harambee)

Business (horizontal networks)

Embezzlement

Mobilise networks for financing campaign costs

What can we do better?

Research findings shed light on the limited impact of conventional anti-corruption approaches which typically do not deal with hidden agendas or tackle the habits of corruption.

Thus, we should:

- Recognize that anti-corruption legal approaches need to be complemented with strategies that target behaviours and identified risk areas in a context-sensitive manner.
- Aim reform efforts to account for the functionality of corrupt practices (e.g. user fees formalise bribes exchanged for better services)
- Harness the power of local social norms and values (reciprocity and social obligations can energise social accountability initiatives)

Informal practices facilitate access to jobs, services and resource

Functionality of corruption

Informal social networks at the grassroots level represent problem solving mechanisms, whereby a person who behaves with integrity is scorned while the corrupt are at the minimum tolerated if not outright admired.

Such networks operate on the basis of reciprocity and the obligation to look after network members, ensuring access to jobs, education, health services and other resources. This is linked to patterns of social acceptability whereby a person who behaves with integrity is scorned while the corrupt are at the minimum tolerated if not outright admired.