



Strategic anti-corruption guidelines for development agencies



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In what context do development agencies face corruption issues?

In their efforts to promote sustainable development around the world, development agencies and their country offices face a variety of corruption risks.

Some risks **directly threaten funded projects**, for example if money intended to finance a new hospital is embezzled, or the building contract is given to the friend of a local politician and at an inflated value.

Other corruption risks **more indirectly, or at least less visibly**, impact the ability of development agencies to achieve their project goals. For instance, if sextortion – the coercive extraction of sexual favours – is prevalent, it will undermine programmes aimed at promoting gender equality.

And when corruption is a **systemic issue**, it hampers sustainable development directly and in multiple ways. Development agencies may therefore consider addressing systemic corruption issues strategically through a dedicated anti-corruption programme.

What is a “strategic” approach to anti-corruption?

The above three types of corruption risk that development agencies face often overlap and spring from the same underlying factors. These factors, or drivers, include the **political economy** and prevailing power relations in a country or community, as well as the **social norms** that influence people’s behaviour.

A strategic approach to anti-corruption in a specific context will therefore always start with a good **diagnosis** that covers two broad areas:

- First, the **major corruption issues** in that country or context that are hindering sustainable development. For example, widespread petty corruption in the health sector or a flawed procurement system that sees inflated contracts going to political cronies.
- Second, the **underlying drivers** of those problems, such as social norms around the need to give “gifts” to health workers, or state capture through powerful networks of elites.

Strategic approaches to anti-corruption will be based on this diagnosis and design projects that are – at the very least – **relevant, feasible, sustainable** and **mindful of risks** or unintended consequences.

Setting out an anti-corruption strategy in black and white – why?

Not all development agencies have written guidelines setting out their strategic approach to anti-corruption. But they have multiple benefits.

Their main purpose is to support the development of **evidence-based and effective anti-corruption programming decisions**. This makes targeted anti-corruption interventions more likely to succeed in their goals, to help the beneficiary communities in tangible ways and to be a good use of taxpayers’ money.

By setting out their strategic anti-corruption approach in black and white, the agency leadership clearly **signals** which areas are important to focus on and how to go about it.

This clear messaging is extremely useful for staff in country offices who face the task of identifying which programmes to fund and how best to design them. New staff joining the country office can quickly grasp not only which projects are being implemented and how, but also – very importantly – why.

The consistent underlying approach also provides a **solid base for learning** from the experiences of peers in other country offices.

Developing the guidelines – a valuable collaborative exercise

Like all strategic documents, the value is not only in the final product but in the process of developing it.

What helps tremendously when developing anti-corruption guidelines is to convene a series of **discussion groups** that bring people from multiple units, disciplines and levels of hierarchy around the table.

This is because corruption is a transversal issue, cutting across almost all other thematic areas and professional specialisms. It is not just a topic for the anti-corruption department and external anti-corruption experts, but needs to include the experiences, views and concerns of those working on the ground.

Getting a broad range of inputs helps to make the guidelines more **robust and reflective of the real challenges** that country offices and programme managers face. The process also helps to get **buy-in**, which is crucial when it comes to implementation.

An agile approach with multiple rounds is probably needed. At the Basel Institute, we typically also find it valuable for a partner anti-corruption organisation or expert to sense-check and challenge the drafts.

It is worth taking this time to get the strategic guidelines right. This is because unlike hands-on operational guidance documents and tools that may evolve more rapidly, the strategic guidelines are approved at the highest levels of the agency and need to be built to last.

Turning strategy into practice – implementing the guidelines

Strategic guidelines are not a recipe for what you should do, but a **recipe for how you should think** and what you should consider.

How best can a development agency help staff turn that knowledge into practical action and avoid it getting lost in the heaps of paperwork that country offices inevitably have to deal with?

A must-have is an **operational guidance document** that translates the guidelines into practical resources and tools. Additional **short explainers** on particular topics, like how to set up a useful monitoring and evaluation system on anti-corruption, are often helpful.

But however user-friendly these documents are, they are the **basis for discussion and not a substitute for it. Some ideas to encourage**

dialogue and active implementation are:

- Short **training** interventions, in which country staff have the opportunity to raise questions about their specific issues.
- **Peer learning events** on anti-corruption, to share experiences with colleagues and learn what's working elsewhere.
- An **on-demand support function** for country staff to bounce ideas around and discuss doubts and concerns relating to anti-corruption.

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