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# Bridging the Elite- Grassroots Divide Among Anticorruption Activists

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## Summary

Corruption-fueled political change is occurring at a historic rate—but is not necessarily producing the desired systemic reforms. There are many reasons for this, but one is the dramatic dissipation of public momentum after a transition. In countries like Armenia, the surge in civic participation that generated 2018’s Velvet Revolution largely evaporated after the new government assumed power. That sort of civic demobilization makes it difficult for government reformers, facing stubbornly entrenched interests, to enact a transformative agenda.

The dynamics in Armenia reflect a trend across the anticorruption landscape, which is also echoed in other sectors. As the field has become more professionalized, anticorruption nongovernment organizations (NGOs) have developed the legal and technical expertise to serve as excellent counterparts/watchdogs for government. Yet this strength can also be a hurdle when it comes to building credibility with the everyday people they seek to represent. The result is a disconnect between elite and grassroots actors, which is problematic at multiple levels:

- Technocratic NGOs lack the “people power” to advance their policy recommendations and are exposed to attack as illegitimate or foreign-sponsored.
- Grassroots networks struggle to turn protest energy into targeted demands and lasting reform, which can leave citizens frustrated and disillusioned about democracy itself.
- Government reformers lack the sustained popular mandate to deliver on the ambitious agenda they promised, leaving them politically vulnerable to the next convulsion of public anger at corruption.

Two strategies can help civil society address this challenge. First, organizations can seek to hybridize, with in-house capacities for both policy analysis and mass mobilization. Alternatively, organizations can build formal or informal coalitions between groups operating at the elite and grassroots levels, respectively. Both strategies pose challenges: learning new skills, weaving together distinct organizational cultures and methodologies, and defining demands that are both technically sound and publicly appealing. In many instances, coalition-building will be an easier road given it does not require altering internal organizational and personnel structures. Political windows-of-opportunity on anticorruption may lend urgency to this difficult task and help crystallize what both sides have to gain from increased partnership.

International supporters can play an important role in advancing civil society alignment on anticorruption. New resources are needed to build domestic constituencies and coalitions—ideally provided in a flexible manner, to a range of groups, over a sustained period of time—and measured by jointly developed metrics. In addition, international actors can provide in-kind training and coaching to NGOs eager to build new partnerships and capabilities, ideally tailored to the governance sector.

Technological change will only intensify the need for greater cohesion in the field. Empowered with new data sources and social media outlets, individual citizens are increasingly assuming the role of corruption watchdog once reserved for professionalized NGOs. This type of expanded public participation can be good but can also amplify calls for quick—and at times superficial—responses to corruption. In this newly cacophonous environment, grassroots NGOs can play a vital role in channeling public engagement toward constructive ends, in partnership with policy organizations that have the technical know-how, historical perspective, and comparative expertise to make the most of growing civic participation.

## Introduction

Public anger at corruption has triggered a remarkable wave of large-scale citizen protests around the world in recent years, from Brazil to South Africa to Puerto Rico to Iraq. In many of these cases, protests have resulted in leadership changes—either ahead of scheduled elections or through elections in which incumbents are punished for their perceived corruption. Between 2013 and 2018, 10 percent of countries in the world experienced corruption-fueled leadership change.<sup>1</sup> Yet often, political change and new governing actors fail to produce the systemic reforms and tangible results that protesters seek.

Why do corruption-fueled political transitions often fail to deliver? In some cases, the new government is not genuinely committed to reform but instead flies the anticorruption banner out of political expediency. New leaders come to office by wrapping themselves in the garb of anticorruption reform while actively seeking to profit from public office. This pattern is illustrated by the scandals that have come to plague the presidency of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who originally ran on an anticorruption platform.<sup>2</sup>

In many other cases, however, new leaders are genuinely committed to anticorruption reforms—at least initially—but once elected, they prove unable to follow through. They may be daunted by the enormity of the task—disentangling corruption’s stranglehold on state institutions—and opt for superficial reforms or punishing individuals rather than changing systems. They may struggle to build capacity in oversight institutions crippled by years of deliberate neglect, with little help from a fractured and slow-moving donor landscape. Perhaps most commonly, they may be deterred by the powerful domestic actors who benefit from the status quo. As former chair of the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission Nuhu Ribadu explained, suspects targeted by law enforcement often “own radio and television stations and newspapers, and can hire the best lawyers,” such that when anticorruption reforms start to work, “corruption fights back.”<sup>3</sup>

In the face of these challenges, well-intentioned officials need to be able to draw on continued public anticorruption momentum to stand up against entrenched interests. Yet in most cases, citizen movements are not able to adequately provide that independent power base. Too often the protesters who successfully drove leadership changes demobilize as soon as new leadership is in place. Elite, technocratic nongovernment organization (NGOs) focused on the specifics of anticorruption reform are left responsible for holding the government accountable politically. But they typically lack the organizing capacity to do so. How can an alliance between “the wonks” and “the street” be sustained long enough to make lasting change?



This paper examines why the disconnect between “the wonks” and “the street” exists in many countries embroiled in corruption issues and the negative consequences of that division. The paper identifies two strategies for overcoming the divide and offers recommendations for international actors to support anticorruption NGOs in building deeper linkages with the citizens they seek to represent. The paper concludes by noting that technological change will only intensify the need for greater cohesion in the anticorruption field. Throughout, the focus is on cases where there is at least some political will for reform at the leadership level. These are contexts where better alignment within civil society could be the game-changing factor that pushes a teetering governance equilibrium toward a new norm of accountability.

## The Elite-Grassroots Divide

As one critical part of the maturation of the anticorruption field in the last two decades, an increasingly professionalized array of elite anticorruption NGOs has emerged within many countries.<sup>4</sup> These organizations, typically based in capitals, boast the requisite legal and technical expertise to support and assess government functions, as well as an international network to draw upon as needed. They play a vital watchdog function and sometimes help build the capacity of local governments.

However, these civil society organizations (CSOs) tend to operate at the elite level and are often disconnected from grassroots stakeholders who have the capacity for mass mobilization (for example, student groups or trade unions). Meanwhile, grassroots communities are well-versed in the patterns of bribery at the local level but do not necessarily see the systemic linkages between different types of corruption. They frequently struggle to identify nuanced and pragmatic policy solutions and lack strong national and international networks.

The gap between elite and grassroots anticorruption groups was reflected in the theme of the Open Government Partnership’s (OGP) 2019 Civil Society Day: “broadening the base.” According to a 2017–18 OGP survey of 900 stakeholders, approximately two-thirds of civil society organizations active in OGP conduct work at the national level, while only one-third work at the local level.<sup>5</sup> Across different contexts, civil society leaders expressed concern that the field had become a victim of its own success. In focusing so much on becoming legitimate counterparts to government, elite civil society groups had lost some of their connection to and credibility with the people. Tonu Basu, who leads OGP’s civic space strategy, noted that “many governments have exploited the perceived gap between professionalized NGOs and grassroots communities to delegitimize civil society, portraying it as elitist in contrast to politicians who claim to establish dialogue directly with the people.”<sup>6</sup>

Recent research in Kenya by the U.S. Institute of Peace highlights a number of these dynamics: “Most professional anti-corruption organizations have a national focus in their change efforts and relatively little two-way engagement with the grass roots. When this engagement does occur, it is often one-way or top-down in the form of information-sharing and civic education initiatives.” Many citizens are aware of these patterns. A nationally representative survey of Kenyans found that “nearly half of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the level of effort by CSOs to include grassroots participation.” These cleavages “can make it easier for corrupt officials to pick off individual anti-corruption groups and brand them as agents of the opposition and make galvanizing an already jaded populace more challenging.”<sup>7</sup>

The gulf between elite and grassroots civil society is not a challenge unique to the anticorruption field. It appears in several areas of civil society activity. A number of civil society projects, like [Accountable Now](#), focus on “constituency-building” with stakeholder communities to strengthen civil society legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> CIVICUS’s [Resilient Roots](#) initiative invests in making organizations more accountable to their beneficiaries as a way to build their resiliency in a context of increasing government restrictions on civic space.<sup>9</sup>

However, the anticorruption sector involves several distinctive dynamics that give particular importance and complexity to the elite-grassroots divide. Two of these dynamics make anticorruption a more difficult topic to build grassroots constituencies around, while two other factors tilt toward anticorruption being an easier topic in this regard.

Anticorruption advocacy, particularly issues such as fiscal governance, can be arcane and *technical*—given the focus on legal accountability, procurement reform, budget transparency, and auditing mechanisms—so it can be challenging to keep the work accessible to nonprofessionals, as Shaazka Beyerle and Davin O’Regan have noted.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, community-based organizations working on anticorruption may be particularly vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy as they scale or when they attempt to partner with elite actors. In highly unequal societies, there may be a perception that anyone associated with political insiders, or even any well-resourced NGO, must be “corrupt”—even if its conduct is entirely legal. That can make it difficult for grassroots organizations to build elite partnerships while retaining credibility with their base. The mistrust and miscommunications also work in reverse, where elites may deem as corrupt a broad range of informal payments and gifts that community members see as completely reasonable.<sup>11</sup> When elites problematize such payments, they may be met with charges of arrogance and cultural imposition. The role that these subjective perceptions play in defining what corruption is and who is guilty-by-association can make it a fraught arena for building partnerships.

Yet at the same time, the injustices and humiliation of corruption have widespread public resonance. Many citizens in developing countries have personal experience with being forced to pay a bribe and can readily understand high-level theft of public resources.<sup>12</sup> Compared to, for example, climate change (which is abstract and long-term for many) or disability rights (which directly affects only a segment of the population), anticorruption has immediate relevance to most citizens. This is encouraging, and it means that the anticorruption field may be able to lead the way in bridging the gap between elites and grassroots stakeholders, generating lessons that other sectors can adapt.

Finally, meaningful anticorruption advocacy may require engagement from a different segment of “the grassroots” than issues such as labor rights, healthcare access, or public welfare programs, for example. In Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Michael Johnston’s review of countries that have escaped the trap of pervasive corruption, they attribute part of the success in Estonia, Chile, and Uruguay to the growing strength of the middle class.<sup>13</sup> This fits with the academic view that a large middle class is critical for governance reform. The middle class is more likely to demand the stability and predictability that comes from a merit-based political system and is less vulnerable than the poor to being coerced to pay into patronage networks.<sup>14</sup> The vital role of the middle class might mean that elite anticorruption NGOs have an easier time reaching their target population than elites in other sectors. Furthermore, that population may have more time and/or income to engage in civic activism.

## Negative Impacts of the Divide

The elite-grassroots gap in anticorruption activism stymies the efficacy of both types of actors. As Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston note, organizations with clear civic agendas are most effective in achieving anticorruption impact when they work alongside “social clubs, ethnic and neighborhood associations, recreational and hobby groups, and many groups whose reasons for being have little immediate connection to the political world.” These organizations are essential to “produce legitimate grassroots leadership cadres.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, grassroots movements gain their strength from representing affected communities. As Shaazka Beyerle finds in her analysis of over twenty-five bottom-up campaigns against corruption, “in virtually every case, the catalysts for the civic initiatives were either already connected to the grass roots or deliberately cultivated relationships with regular people . . . [making] painstaking efforts to establish credibility and trust, thereby building a foundation upon which to engage and mobilize people.”<sup>16</sup>

A disconnect between elite and grassroots actors can reinforce unhelpful siloes between grand and petty corruption, the capital and rural areas, and advocacy and monitoring efforts—all of which makes it difficult to build critical mass for changing governance norms. Sectoral disunity also has specific negative impacts on professionalized NGOs, grassroots actors, and political reformers.

The elite-grassroots divide often causes *elite NGOs* to:

- Lack the “people power” needed to achieve major demands. Without a strong mobilization capacity, advocacy campaigns are weak. They also may fail to harness the potential of new technology being deployed by digital organizers, which can enable new forms of collective action—forging alliances between the capital and rural areas and facilitating asynchronous communication with large numbers of people.
- Struggle to anticipate and quickly react to surges in public attention. For example, Conectas, an established Brazilian human rights NGO, was reportedly caught off guard by the 2014 protests against corruption in Brazil’s management of the World Cup.<sup>17</sup>
- Pick the wrong policy goals (that is, goals that are misaligned with citizen priorities or lacking in public resonance). This may be reflected in the preponderance of campaigns focused on anticorruption processes (for example, budget transparency, procurement reform) rather than service-delivery outcomes (such as in health and education). A lack of local connectivity may also mean that national groups miss the opportunity to capture innovations working in one community and scale them to others.
- Deploy messaging that either backfires or is out of touch with on-the-ground realities. Campaigns on corruption can inadvertently increase public cynicism about democracy, fuel authoritarianism, or accelerate calls for sweeping privatization. These unintended consequences may be easier to avoid if professional communicators are working in tight collaboration with the population they seek to reach. Closer connectivity with grassroots communities can also enrich communications campaigns with compelling real-world stories.
- Incur safety and operational risks. A lack of public trust in NGOs can compromise the physical safety of NGO leaders, making it more difficult for them to depend on community protection mechanisms. When NGOs do not have a clear base, it is also easier for governments to undermine their reputations.

Recent dynamics in Slovakia illustrate several of these challenges. Zuzana Wienk, a steering committee member of OGP and founder of the leading Slovak political watchdog NGO [Fair-Play Alliance](#), explained that over the course of her many years in civil society, “we believed that our work was delivering for citizens at large due to the fact that our causes are universal. We did not realize that the *tools* necessary to advance these causes—access to information, work with open data, legal actions against corruption, and so on—are much more accessible to elites (educated, skilled).” Her team’s intensive focus on applying these technical tools meant that they did not have the energy to, in her words, “broaden our base and find a way how to a) meaningfully involve less educated, marginalized [people] into our causes, b) to provide hope and a positive way out of state capture and corruption.”<sup>18</sup>

Their lack of grassroots connectivity, plus the frustration that the public felt when faced with the startling corruption that Slovakian watchdog groups had exposed, proved a dangerous combination. Wienk acknowledged that corruption revelations ended up, inadvertently, feeding political extremists in Slovakia, who exploited public outrage to gain power. When civil society pushed back in defense of democracy, Wienk reported, “they started to portray us as foreign traitors who are not genuine and are in the NGO ‘business’ just for good money.”

Wienk acknowledged that these lessons have only emerged with the benefit of time, but he noted, “if I had known the consequences earlier, I would have probably tried much more to balance our efforts by focusing on inclusion and a broader base (both making less educated, marginalized [people a] direct part of the cause [and] finding narratives and using language closer to these constituencies) and also balancing out the watchdogging [role] much more strongly by trying to find ways out to hope and positive solutions.”<sup>19</sup>

For *grassroots organizations and movements*, the elite-grassroots divide means that they often:

- Lack access to the rigorous policy analysis necessary to turn abstract demands into measurable goals. Absent clear and winnable demands, protest energy fizzles. Movements may achieve local successes or pursue reactive campaigns but fail to make systemic change.
- Struggle to keep members active after the emotional peak of a political transition. Without an outlet for continued engagement and political education as part of an ongoing campaign, citizens may grow more impatient with the slow pace and limited scope of reform.
- Lack the cross-sectoral networks or the international ties to do systems-level analysis, coalition-building, and peer learning. Without such ties, groups may not benefit from external lessons and may miss opportunities to leverage foreign pressure toward common goals.

For *government reformers*, the divide often leads to:

- A lack of political top cover—via persistent outside pressure—to undertake truly transformative reforms. Lacking an independent domestic power base, would-be reformers whittle down proposals to mere symbolic acts—such as changing the leadership of law enforcement agencies—rather than systemic change—such as overhauling the process for vetting judges and prosecutors. This leaves the administration vulnerable to being voted out with the next convulsion of public anger at corruption.
- At an extreme, reformers who persist in their bold ambitions—without an organized constituency to back them up—can face greater personal safety risks, as seen in the growing number of Mexican mayors who are murdered after they vow to crack down on corruption.<sup>20</sup>

When political upheavals fail to deliver on their soaring promises, citizens who took to the streets—who dared to hope—may grow cynical about democracy itself. Over time, it becomes harder to entice people into civic participation. Disillusioned and lacking civil society pathways to express their grievances, they become more receptive to the appeal of authoritarian populists. Unified action on corruption during windows of opportunity can be a prevention strategy against civic hopelessness and its dangerous side effects.

Armenia's recent trajectory encapsulates several of these dynamics. The anticorruption window of opportunity opened by the historic Velvet Revolution in 2018 was driven less by established NGOs and more by informal networks, connected via social media, animated by a charismatic reformist leader, Nikol Pashinyan. But after new leadership took power, public engagement quickly dissipated. Citizens reported, "We did our part. Now the government will do its part."<sup>21</sup> The notion that more work would be required—that even a well-intentioned administration still requires public pressure to uproot corruption, especially in the face of resistance from Russian oligarchs—has proved painful for many to acknowledge. Policy experts and investigative journalists that do acknowledge it can face a backlash from citizens who accuse them of being "anti-revolutionary." Furthermore, the post-revolution government did not create clear pathways for sustained civic participation, especially by youth—believing in some cases that the activists-turned-bureaucrats now in government could adequately represent the views of civil society. Meanwhile, the pace of reform has slowed.

There are ways to ameliorate this dynamic—methods Armenia's reformers have belatedly found. Policy groups like Transparency International's Armenia chapter are investing in youth outreach while youth-led organizations like Article 3 conduct popular education events in rural areas to inform citizens about their rights.<sup>22</sup> These sort of bridging functions will be essential to strengthen civil society's hand in advocating for long-lasting reform. Starting such interventions early could avoid squandering time during a brief political window of opportunity.

## Two Solutions

Some anticorruption activists are trying to overcome the elite-grassroots divide via two strategies: (a) building hybrid anticorruption organizations, with both policy and organizing capacity, or (b) building coalitions between groups focused on anticorruption policy and groups with existing organizing capacity.

The focus here is on arrangements through which national and local organizations can cooperate in an egalitarian manner rather than a hub-and-spoke model through which a headquarters interacts with its chapters, or a lead organization with its field implementers. Such models do little to level the power imbalance between center and periphery. With an agenda and tone set at the national level, rather than negotiated jointly between national and local levels, these models fail to fully tap into the insights, priorities, and strengths of subnational leaders. The grassroots credibility of such campaigns also falls short, as power clearly rests at the elite level. Given these limitations, this paper focuses on models that build co-equal relationships between grassroots and technical experts, in the service of shared goals.

### Hybrid Organizations in Action

Hybrid organizations can originate either as organizing groups or policy-focused groups. The former scenario, in which an established people's organization grows its policy engagement and international networks, is exemplified by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), based in the Indian state of Rajasthan.<sup>23</sup> Its work on land and wage issues led MKSS to campaign for a Right to Information law, which it successfully won at the national level. MKSS leaders are now internationally renowned in the open government community while remaining rooted in their work on the ground.<sup>24</sup>

Amarribo, founded in the Brazilian city of Ribeirão Bonito, started in 1999 with a focus on local development issues.<sup>25</sup> Soon it became apparent that corruption was a first-order priority. Amarribo shifted its focus to fighting corruption and succeeded in achieving municipal-level reforms. Their success captured the interest of anticorruption campaigners in other cities, and Amarribo now hosts a network of 200 organizations across Brazil in addition to continuing its work in Ribeirão Bonito—thus bridging historic divides between national and local groups.<sup>26</sup>

A variant on the bottom-up route is organizations that emerge from protest movements, and then professionalize over time—while seeking to retain their activist spirit and public appeal. In Guatemala, the organization #JusticiaYa emerged from unprecedented street protests in 2015, which ultimately toppled then president Otto Pérez Molina's government.<sup>27</sup> It has now transformed into an

established organizing collective with campaigns to influence public policy decisions related to corruption alongside sustained political education activities.

The alternative route to hybridization involves a policy group that builds a base of constituents. This top-down route could characterize several Transparency International chapters around the world. In addition, Ukraine's [Anti-Corruption Action Center](#)—which enjoys international renown and has strong policy analysis capability—is now seeking to connect with everyday Ukrainians by building a movement of taxpayers to power their edgy campaigns.<sup>28</sup> In Kenya, former UN special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association Maini Kiai co-directs a community organizing group, [InformAction](#), which uses film to engage communities about rights issues and spark grassroots action.<sup>29</sup> And in several OGP member countries, especially at the subnational level, NGOs have started supporting platforms that provide citizens a direct channel to influence and monitor public decision-making, for example where it relates to the delivery of public services intended for them.<sup>30</sup>

In some instances, authoritarian environments prompt professionalized NGOs to strategically build constituencies to bolster their work. When restrictions on foreign funding were imposed in Russia, the independent media platform [7x7](#) found itself adversely affected and somewhat isolated from the domestic communities it sought to serve. This prompted 7x7 to deepen its efforts to connect with audiences, which has led to a boost in growth. Now the platform is expanding to new regions. Also in Russia, [Agora International Human Rights Group](#) pursues both strategic litigation as well as legal aid to individuals, paired with intensive public outreach efforts, which builds a stable network of citizen supporters to buffer their more politically controversial work.

### Considerations for Hybridizing

Organizations seeking to hybridize face a series of questions. Those moving from the bottom up may wrestle with how to gain policy sophistication and a new set of elite relationships while retaining credibility and resonance with everyday people. They may ask questions like: “How can we stay accountable locally? How can we avoid ‘mission drift’ as we seek out new funding and partnerships?” They also may struggle to identify pathways for members to stay meaningfully engaged as parts of the work become more technical. Doing so may require development of clear units within the organization, each with distinct specialties—which can open a new suite of organizational change questions. Some movements seek to hybridize via partisan engagement. That can be a rocky path, as evidenced in the trajectory of Spain's Podemos movement. It started with an anticorruption street mandate as part of the *indignado* movement against austerity policies in 2011,<sup>31</sup> but in recent years it has struggled to balance institutionalist and activist wings of the party.<sup>32</sup>



Meanwhile, when policy groups seek to build constituencies around their work, they too face several quandaries:

- **Which segment of “the grassroots” do we target?** As discussed above, anticorruption movements may resonate most with the middle class, who can afford to challenge power structures. Nonetheless, activists would do well to build bridges across class lines wherever possible.<sup>33</sup> In addition, youth are almost always an important driver of mobilization against corruption. According to a study of recent anticorruption protests, in six out of seven cases, “youthful demonstrators from relatively prosperous, educated, and citified backgrounds have made up the bulk of the crowds.”<sup>34</sup>
- **Should we build our capacity to do traditional community organizing or movement-style mobilization?** While the two overlap, organizing centers on building long-term local leadership through one-on-one relationships and campaigns with defined policy goals. Mobilization seeks to catalyze mass protest, among a loose network, around broadly shared grievances. They are both distinct from elite-driven advocacy. Organizing can be slower and smaller but generate tangible policy results, while mobilization can achieve more widespread participation but may lack sufficient structure to deliver results. The gulf between the two models is real,<sup>35</sup> though frameworks like Momentum are experimenting with how to combine the best of both approaches.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the Leading Change Network (LCN) focuses on building organizing groups that are politically responsive.<sup>37</sup> As LCN Executive Director Ana Babovic explains, organizing is the water and mobilization is the waves: the organizing infrastructure needs to be in place so that the campaign is ready to ride the tide of political momentum when it comes.<sup>38</sup>
- **How do we learn these new skills?** Locally, policy groups may be able to learn from other organizations operating in the same environment. Internationally, a nascent field of capacity-building organizations seeks to train groups in organizing and mobilization, such as [LCN](#), [Rhize](#), [MobLab](#), [Campaign BootCamp](#), [BeautifulRising](#), [Global Change Lab](#), [Global Platforms](#), [350.org](#), and the [European Community Organising Network](#). Though none of these groups focus on the governance sector alone, they can facilitate powerful peer exchanges. One challenge they face is tailoring their trainings to local contexts. For instance, building long-term relationships may be natural for leaders in a stable rural community but difficult for grassroots activists in a transient city. Other challenges these organizations face include getting the right people in the room for trainings, fostering trust in peer cohorts, and—perhaps most of all—ensuring lessons are applied back home afterward. “Organizing involves confronting power structures in a more fundamental way than policy analysis, and not everyone is ready to take those risks,” according to Karina Grinstein at the Open Society Foundations, who has experimented with some of these capacity-building methods. “Some are convinced that the ‘inside game’ is more effective than assertive approaches, or struggle to overcome a legacy of civic passivity—especially in post-Soviet

countries.”<sup>39</sup> In some instances, elite NGO leaders may even identify more with government officials than with citizens. These challenges all mean that broad training programs inevitably yield only a small number of “stars,” who then need follow-up mentorship. This reality means that such capacity-building can be costly and take time.

### Coalition-Building in Action

The second broad strategy for linking technical anticorruption experts with grassroots communities is to form coalitions between existing groups. In her study of anti-corruption “people power,” Beyerle discusses coalitions as follows: “In addition to affording higher levels of participation, protection through numbers (of people), credibility, and legitimacy, such alliances are a font of creativity, ideas, and talent, as well as increased resources, relationships, and contacts—all of which the civic campaign or movement can use.”<sup>40</sup>

Coalitions can be enduring alliances among organizations or ad hoc structures built around specific campaigns. An example of the latter is detailed by Beyerle.<sup>41</sup> In the face of a politicized attempt to undermine Indonesia’s formidable anticorruption commission (known as the KPK) in 2009, anticorruption watchdogs and lawyers based in the capital decided they needed a wide-ranging coalition. Initial members were expert groups such as the Centre for Policy and Law Studies and Indonesia Corruption Watch, but they quickly enlisted the support of women’s groups, student groups, religious communities, organized labor, and more. Ultimately over 100 groups at the national and local levels joined the coalition, and under the banner “Love Indonesia, Love Anti-Corruption Commission” they were able to defend the KPK, at least for a time.

A more recent example comes from the U.S. city of Seattle. A broad coalition frustrated by the corrupting influence of big money in politics succeeded in establishing a public financing program for municipal elections, known as the Democracy Voucher Program.<sup>42</sup> Their victory was particularly notable because historically the campaign finance field has been predominately white, technical, and elite—and has often failed to galvanize public attention. Yet in Seattle, democracy advocates were able to form an alliance with grassroots activists from other sectors—education, gun control, workers’ rights—who realized that the outsized influence of corporate spending in elections was standing in their way. By tapping into the self-interest of a broad swath of progressive organizations, the coalition was able to win a historic money-in-politics campaign.

### Considerations for Coalition-Building

When professionalized anticorruption NGOs seek alliances with grassroots groups, they must first decide which type of partner to pursue. Culturally, it may be easiest to build cross-sectoral NGO coalitions where elite anticorruption organizations partner with NGOs in sectors with more

mobilized constituencies—such as healthcare or wildlife trafficking. Alternatively, NGOs may seek to partner with nonpolitical civic institutions whose members are affected by corruption (for example, student associations, religious congregations, trade unions, and regional organizations).

A third option—which poses both the highest risk and highest potential reward—is to cultivate partnerships with a social movement. Movements typically are fluid groupings that emerge in response to politically salient grievances. Depending on the local conditions, they may have a loosely established member base or be a network connected via social media that emerges around a particular event.<sup>43</sup>

If NGOs can work with movement organizers to harness the power of the crowd to advance strategic demands, the outcomes can be historic. The U.S. civil rights movement, for example, combined established policy/legal organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) with a deep bench of grassroots leaders trained in nonviolent action. Yet tensions within the civil rights movement also point to the difficulty of coordination across the NGO-movement divide. Foundations can play an important role in easing these tensions by using their convening power and resources to support coalition-building (while mitigating the risk that fundraising competition among organizations will deepen divisions in the field). In the civil rights case, the Taconic Foundation and Ford Foundation played an important role in convening the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership, which bridged established and grassroots wings of the movement, while Taconic and others supported collaborative initiatives like the Voter Education Project, a joint project of the NAACP, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and others.<sup>44</sup>

One challenge is that a quickly growing movement can become unglued as quickly as it formed, as the salience of the issue fades or resignation sets in. Not all participants will be interested or able to sustain their involvement over the long term, leading some of the protest energy to naturally dissipate.<sup>45</sup> Even if the movement endures, its operations may be decentralized, based in rural areas rather than the capital, and driven by volunteers rather than professionals—all of which can produce a culture clash with NGOs. An NGO may need to cultivate individual relationships with movement organizers rather than pursuing a formal coalition structure, or it may work through intermediary organizations that can serve a bridging function. The NGO also may need to navigate generational divides or ethnic and class divisions to build a productive alliance. If these obstacles can be surmounted, technical experts have much to gain from the input of movement organizers and vice versa.

In any form, partnerships between technical anticorruption experts and affected communities face the question of how to scope demands. Too narrow and the demands will not be inspirational; too broad and they will not be achievable.<sup>46</sup> Left to their own devices, policy experts might frame demands in strictly technical terms—which may fail to resonate with the public and can also be appeased with superficial fixes that leave the structures of corruption untouched.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, movement leaders may face pressure to adopt grandiose demands (“end corruption!”) that are difficult to measure or meet. Even slightly less grandiose demands (“the president must go!”) will likely fail to untangle deep networks of corruption. Working together, technical experts and grassroots communities can carefully calibrate demands that are both concrete and resonant. One possibility is to craft demands that link anticorruption directly to a measurable service-delivery problem, as the International Budget Partnership has done in South Africa by advocating for budget transparency in the context of improved sanitation.<sup>48</sup>

In all scenarios, participants will have to harmonize organizational cultures as part of building a shared culture for the coalition while guarding the integrity of their individual missions. Parties face the risk of capture or mission drift if they are not clear about the areas of overlap—and divergence—from other coalition partners. Throughout, they must weigh the benefits of coalition work against the costs of coordination.

## Implications

Naturally, the choice between hybridizing and building coalitions will depend on context. As a general principle, though, existing entities may have an easier time building coalitions than trying to transform their internal structure and personnel to become a hybrid organization, as it can be challenging for a single organization to straddle the different demands (and cultures) of both analyzing policy and organizing people. Even if a policy group succeeds in developing the skills to build grassroots constituencies, the organization may face internal cleavages as different units take on different tones, jargon, dress, and so on. A policy expert from the capital may feel it is beneath him/her to risk rejection by grassroots activists in a rural area, while a rural activist may struggle to “code switch” to relate to policy professionals in the capital. The large gulfs of mistrust between the two communities make this an adaptive challenge—and not just a technical one.<sup>49</sup> As such, coalitions are often a more viable strategy.

Whichever method is adopted, aligning policy and organizing efforts requires both sides to adapt their communications. Grassroots organizations may have to increase the nuance with which they talk about corruption and invest in political education on relevant solution sets. Policy organizations

may have to shift, as Beyerle puts it, “from abstract exhortations against corruption or legalistic and administrative jargon (too technical and removed from citizens’ lives) to discourse, tactics, and objectives derived from the social and cultural realities of the grass roots in the particular struggle context.”<sup>50</sup> This could include identifying clear pathways for citizen engagement, which would ideally be highlighted via “narrative change” campaigns cocreated with affected communities.<sup>51</sup>

This work is hard in any circumstance. Window-of-opportunity moments may be valuable catalysts for these sorts of partnerships. Granted, the initial burst of protest energy may work against prospects for collaboration, given that newly high-profile movement leaders may be disdainful of elites while technocrats who have worked for years with little public profile may be suddenly disconcerted by their lack of relevance. Yet as protests continue, enlightened movement leaders may see the upside of elevating rigorously considered policy solutions while technocrats recognize the value of tapping into this unprecedented swell of civic energy. Thus, such moments of heightened public attention can be a wake-up call for both parties and lend urgency to the project of civil society alignment.

Of course, in the best case scenario, those partnerships would already be in place long before the political spark is lit—allowing time for the slow process of trust building to unfold. That way, no time would be wasted during the window of opportunity on inward looking civil society dynamics. This points to the need for visionary civil society leaders and donors with the foresight to support alignment efforts before a window opens. In the absence of such planning, high stakes political openings can provide powerful fuel for bridging civil society cleavages.

## Recommendations for International Supporters

International actors can take various measures to facilitate greater cohesion among domestic actors confronting corruption:

- **Providing new resources:** Building local legitimacy and constituencies takes time, energy, and money. Those expenses often fall into the generic category of overhead, which tends to be underfunded. Though that may be changing,<sup>52</sup> small organizations like Accountability Lab report how hard it is to marshal the funding needed to invest in local relationships.<sup>53</sup> Funders can help address this problem by segmenting out additional resources for local constituency building or by expanding support for overhead. Either way, donors should be careful not to be too prescriptive about constituency-building methods in order to shift accountability relationships from external funders to local communities. This can help rectify the negative impact some donors have had in “professionalising and depoliticising operations by turning NGOs into implementers or

contractors of donor policy, rather than representatives of grassroots constituencies,” in the words of researchers Nicola Banks and David Hulme.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes donors will need to step back if there are clashes between their priorities (such as grand corruption) and local community priorities (such as petty corruption) to enable NGOs to build trust with communities.

- **Organizational coaching:** Support the development of a tailored capacity-building program for anticorruption policy organizations eager to engage in constituency building. Such an initiative could address dynamics specific to the anticorruption field, as referenced above, and facilitate learning across the sector. Any training program should combine group workshops with sustained individual follow-up, so that participants can apply lessons on the ground with the benefit of hands-on coaching support.
- **Facilitate skill-sharing:** Donors can use their convening power to organize peer exchanges across localities and sectors while preserving a context-driven approach. Such exchanges should be sure to include community leaders alongside technical experts to build up their international networks. One area of skill development may be in code-switching between engagement with local stakeholders versus international donors.
- **Flexible funding:** Grantees keen to invest in local legitimacy would benefit from donors providing flexible funding to organizations or coalitions rather than narrow project-based grants.<sup>55</sup> This is in line with recommendations from U.S. Institute of Peace’s recent report on donor support to transparency and accountability movements, which found that “more flexible support will allow individual activists and movement organizations to scale up their work, adapt to changing circumstances, and seize opportunities while freeing them from the project-based and earmarked grants that currently constrain their approach.”<sup>56</sup> This support might include dedicated funding for coordination between the national and subnational levels, which could help overcome challenges in contexts like Kenya, where a lack of connectivity between Nairobi and county-based groups contributes to resentment from grassroots groups “who feel they do not get credit for the work they do on behalf of larger implementing partners who receive donor funding.”<sup>57</sup>
- **Systems approach:** Addressing civil society fragmentation requires aligning multiple interlocking pieces of a system—and potentially crafting new pieces. In such contexts, Duncan Green describes the work of international actors as “ecosystem gardeners” looking—either directly or via intermediaries—“for vigorous local plants, whatever their origins (civil society, faith-based, private sector)” and investing in the enabling environment for their growth.<sup>58</sup> In particular, funders should look to include smaller and newer groups, especially those taking part in coalition efforts, to reduce competition and resentment of large recipients of foreign aid.<sup>59</sup>

- **Strategic patience:** Constituency-building work is likely to be slower and less linear than technical projects, though it has the potential to yield bigger wins. A recent report on philanthropic support for community organizing in Europe recommends “smaller funding over a longer, sustained period of time.”<sup>60</sup> Donors must also allow for—and indeed encourage—adaptation along the way in response to political setbacks and opportunities. Former senior anticorruption adviser for the UK Department of International Development Phil Mason recommends donors adopt a long-term approach that “would see the setting of strategic objectives that blend clarity of end vision with flexibility of methods, accepting uncertainty along the journey by developing responsive actions ‘on the go’ to align with opportunities, and committing to programmes lasting at least a decade (and preferably more).”<sup>61</sup>
- **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL):** In describing politically oriented campaigns for fiscal accountability, longtime Indian activist Nikhil Dey notes, “this is not something that can be donor-driven or controlled. Even worse is when a donor or set of donors waits to apply a ‘results framework’ of some kind before providing support, or pulling the plug. It would be better to not support the effort at all than be the one to decide that the results are not commensurate with the support.”<sup>62</sup> To avoid top-down approaches, donors and grantees can jointly develop MEL plans that include grassroots engagement/legitimacy as a key outcome of interest rather than just policy-based outcomes. This will require developing indicators that chart the experiments and learning of groups pursuing this work. Donors can also include indicators on citizen accountability in their organizational health assessments, so that it gets factored into eligibility evaluations for prospective grantees.
- **Alternative financing:** Donor funding can carry risks for the sustainability—and indeed local legitimacy—of activist campaigns. Beyerle notes that the majority of recent anticorruption movements did not receive donor funding, and the rare example that did—in Uganda—ended up collapsing after not receiving a grant renewal.<sup>63</sup> Yet, research on social movements in Kenya, Ukraine, and Nigeria indicates that credibility risks associated with accepting foreign funding were largely outweighed by the benefits.<sup>64</sup> Donors can certainly play a helpful role in commissioning and disseminating research on financing models that may be better aligned with building public engagement than outside funding. This may include income-generating approaches that also build constituencies (such as low-cost legal aid for local residents), introduction of a dues model, or other approaches documented by the organization Rights CoLAB.<sup>65</sup>

## Looking Ahead

Technology is accelerating the need to build linkages between elite and grassroots actors. Expanded internet access and social media connectivity fueled many of the anticorruption success stories that Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston document.<sup>66</sup> One of the earliest examples of crowdsourced anticorruption action yields some lessons about the constructive role technology can play. The website IPaidABribe.com started in the city of Bangalore as a tool to track the market price of bribery in different government services.<sup>67</sup> By leveraging technology, it created a pathway for mass public participation, thereby accomplishing something that could not have been achieved by a professionalized NGO alone—identifying hotspots of corruption in local service delivery. The tool was embedded in the ongoing work of the NGO Janaagraha,<sup>68</sup> which was able to aggregate public input, combine it with policy expertise, and formulate winning campaigns that reduced corruption and improved public services. The group’s success shows how public participation—enabled by technology—can be paired with policy analysis for unstoppable impact.

While IPaidABribe.com channeled grassroots engagement in a highly targeted manner, technology also enables the sparks of public participation to fly in a much less controlled manner. Institutions that once held a monopoly over watchdog functions or large-scale coordination now risk obsolescence as once-passive citizens are increasingly taking on the role of corruption investigator—and sometimes litigator in the court of public opinion—that was previously reserved for elites. New e-government data sets and leaks from private industry, combined with individual experiences of corruption, offer a panoply of sources for corruption allegations that can be posted on social media with little vetting. In Clay Shirky’s book *Here Comes Everybody*, he describes this change as “mass amateurization” and notes that “the transfer of these capabilities from various professional classes to the general public is epochal.”<sup>69</sup>

While Shirky holds an upbeat view of these changes, they could equally present serious challenges. Mass movements may be successful in achieving mass power but fail their cause through a lack of technical know-how while souring activists on the possibility of change. “Amateurs” tend to focus on highly visible manifestations of corruption (either in local service delivery or in the excesses of senior officials), while technical experts may focus on less visible but potentially more costly corruption in procurement or audit functions. In addition, the demands of nonprofessionals tilt toward the dramatic rather than the pragmatic. In the wake of a political transition, for instance, public audiences may focus exclusively on punishing corrupt actors from the past regime while those informed by external lessons might point instead to the harder—but arguably more important—work of preventing future corruption via legal and bureaucratic changes.



In addition, “amateurs” may underestimate the difficulty and duration of transformative anticorruption reforms. This can lead them to conclude the problem is solved by installing a new regime and to be baffled—or even offended—by the attempts of policy NGOs and independent media to hold the new regime to account, as in the Armenia case above. Partnerships between elite and grassroots actors can help manage public expectations about the timeline for reform while mobilizing constituent pressure to keep the pace moving as quickly as possible.

Given the practical and substantive challenges of integrating citizen viewpoints, it is no surprise that many experts are threatened by the public’s encroachment on their domain of expertise and fail to seize the opportunity to channel public interest and capability.<sup>70</sup> Yet doing so ignores opportunities for collective action—especially if mass civic participation can be harnessed in an organized way. Moreover, elite NGOs ignore public engagement at their own peril, as remaining isolated can perpetuate accusations that they are irrelevant and illegitimate. Domestically these accusations may be fueled by illiberal populists, while internationally, technocrats seem to be losing favor with donors who are newly excited by social movements. Technology exacerbates these dynamics, as social media amplifies majoritarian instincts in a way that drowns out technical experts.

Taken together, these trends point to the inevitability of a more assertive populace. The question is not if but how anticorruption experts can build bridges with citizen-activists. If they do so deliberately, in partnership with grassroots organizations, and enabled by supportive donors, anticorruption reformers can achieve greater impact.

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