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INFORMATION NOTE

United Nations Pacific Regional
Anti-Corruption (UN-PRAC) Project

Considerations to Promote Ethical Behaviour in the Public Sector

KEY POINTS

- Corruption in the public sector can have a detrimental effect on all ministries and departments. This can include healthcare, transport, education, welfare, and environmental protection.
- This paper focuses on the behavioural side of addressing corruption. That is: how can we motivate public officials to join us in effectively preventing and countering corruption?
- Public officials may engage in corruption, depending on their calculation of risks and rewards, as well as acceptable behavioural norms.
- To promote public sector effectiveness and integrity, governments of Pacific Island Countries (PICs) should aim to understand and influence behavioural norms and intrinsically and extrinsically motivate public officials through rewards and consequences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage intrinsic motivation by requiring that public officials are those who demonstrate a commitment to act with integrity and to help serve the public during the recruitment process; socializing individuals into behaviours that reflect public sector motivation through codes of conduct that outline ethical behaviour and trainings to help public officials internalize the important role they play and the impact their actions have on citizens; consider circulating surveys to understand why some public officials may feel less satisfied, unsupported or unsafe in their roles and develop informed responses; and ensuring managers and supervisors are trained to support and cultivate an environment where public officials are motivated to act ethically.
- Promote extrinsic motivation by offering integrity awards for stellar performance; developing strong internal regulations that outline consequences for unethical behaviour; implementing regular reviews that provide feedback to staff on their performance; creating anonymous places or boxes for public officials to share feedback and report potential corruption; and promoting clear guidelines for the reporting of wrongdoing, along with frameworks that protect those who report.
- Address behavioural norms by considering the social context in which public officials work, particularly the influence and impact of family, kinship, or friendship expectations. Trainings to help public officials internalize the importance of their role in serving the public interest may be helpful, along with mandatory conflict of interest disclosures and policies that restrict family members from working together. Internal regulations that require public officials to take individual responsibility for their actions can also mitigate the influence of group expectations.



The public sector is essential to improving quality of life, protecting the vulnerable and ensuring economic development. It provides services to people living within its jurisdiction, often including healthcare, transport, education, welfare and environmental protection. In the Pacific in particular, the public sector employs a large proportion of the population.¹

Due to the significant responsibility public officials have, as well as the impact their negative actions may have on citizens, it is essential that they act ethically when carrying out their roles.

Corruption in the public sector is particularly detrimental to society as it increases the cost of public goods and services as funds are syphoned from important sectors like health, education and welfare, reducing the quality of available services and disproportionately hurting the most vulnerable individuals. This decreases trust in public institutions and damages the legitimacy of governments in the eyes of the public, leading to a loss of popular support and trust. It erodes the capacity of institutions as procedures are ignored, resources are diverted and public officials are bribed or otherwise unduly enriched.

Having recognized the importance of addressing corruption for sustaining social and economic stability and growth, reducing poverty and building effective, accountable and transparent institutions, the international community included countering corruption in its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in particular, SDG 16, which requires States to “*promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.*” SDG 16 includes two important targets for anti-corruption: 16.5, to substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all forms, and 16.6, to develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels. Public sector effectiveness and efficiency are integral in creating robust institutions that work towards reducing corruption and bribery.² SDG 16 is also an enabler for the achievement of all other SDGs. For example, both SDG 3: Good Health

and Well-being and SDG 4: Quality Education, require an effective and efficient public sector to deliver healthcare and ensure a well-functioning education system.

The implementation of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the only legally-binding international anti-corruption instrument, contributes to the achievement of SDG 16. It sets forth universally agreed standards for preventing and countering corruption in both the public and private sectors. The Convention has been ratified by 189 Parties, including all Pacific Island Countries,³ and includes specific articles that establish a holistic framework for promoting public sector integrity under chapter II on preventive measures. This includes article 7 on the public sector, which requires States parties to adopt, maintain and strengthen systems for the recruitment, hiring, retention, promotion, and retirement of civil servants, such as by ensuring systems are based on principles of efficiency, transparency, and objective criteria (art. 7(1)(a)).⁴

Article 8 of the Convention, regarding codes of conduct for public officials, also calls on States parties to promote integrity, honesty, and responsibility among their public officials, including by endeavouring to apply codes or standards of conduct for the correct, honourable, and proper performance of public functions (arts. 8(1) and 8(2)). In addition, States parties must consider establishing systems to facilitate reports by public officials of acts of corruption to appropriate authorities (art. 8(4)).

These articles require States parties to develop comprehensive systems to help ensure that the public sector abides by good governance principles including transparency, accountability, openness, effectiveness, and efficiency. Not only will this help prevent corruption, but it will foster high-quality, cost-effective service delivery, contribute to institutional capacity and promote trust in public institutions.

While there are many publications focused on the institutional side of corruption and how governments can use checks and balances and other mechanisms

¹ UN, ‘SDG 16,’ Available: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>.

² UNODC, ‘Signature and Ratification Status,’ (11 August 2021). Available: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/corruption/ratification-status.html>.

³ UN General Assembly, *United Nations Convention Against Corruption*, 31 October 2003, A/58/42. Available: https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNCAC/Publications/Convention/08-50026_E.pdf.

⁴ Robert Klitgaard, ‘BSG Working Paper Series: On culture and corruption’ (July 2017) BSG-WP-2017/020, p.1. Available: <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-05/BSG-WP-2017-020.pdf>.

to address corruption in the public sector, there is little written on the behavioural aspect, namely: How can we motivate public officials to effectively do their jobs and contribute to the fight against corruption?

This information note aims to address this question by examining the factors that may drive public officials to engage in corruption and identifying key recommendations for Pacific governments to improve ethical behaviour.

Why public officials may engage in corruption

Public officials may engage in corruption as a result of behavioural norms, as well as their calculation of the reward they may receive if they engage in corruption compared to the risk of getting caught.⁵ Where a person believes the reward may outweigh the risk, they may engage in corrupt behaviour when they have the opportunity or power to do so. This opportunity or power may come from the information they have access to as a result of being a public official (i.e., drawing up the specifications for a particular tender in a procurement process so that a company they indirectly own may receive the contract).

Behavioural norms may set a particular expectation that an individual engage in corrupt behaviour to maintain relationships or because engaging in corruption is viewed as the only way to get things done.⁶ For example, a norm that encourages corruption could be related to reciprocation, where it is standard that a person must repay another for doing them a favour, even if doing so would be corrupt and against the law. Likewise, a norm could involve social proof, which is when a person assumes the behaviour of others is correct in a given situation and thus also engages in that behaviour.⁷

It is important to address both an individual's calculation of risks and rewards, as well as the

context in which they work – such as social or behavioural norms. In addition, while not the focus of this publication, other factors also contribute to whether public officials act with integrity. This includes whether the public sector is sufficiently funded and provides the necessary materials for public officials to perform their jobs, whether public officials feel safe, and whether the laws and policies in place facilitate an enabling environment for public officials to engage in good governance.

The Pacific context

Behavioural norms that enable corruption exist in many countries. In the Pacific in particular, some argue that PICs place high value on kin connections and kin loyalty – so much so, that power, wealth, and opportunities may be distributed based on kinship.⁸

This presents many advantages, particularly in the sense that Pacific Islanders have strong community networks and offer support to their families, such as through the *wantok* system.⁹

However, it may also mean that people are unable or unwilling to say no to their family members when they are acting corruptly, even when the risk outweighs the reward. A prevalence of kinship could mean the effects of reciprocity are also high - where a public official will do what they can to reciprocate favours from their families as opposed to following the rules of the workplace.¹⁰

These environments may create opportunities for nepotism to occur where a person is given a job or an opportunity because a person in their family is responsible for recruitment decisions. Again, while having family members working together is not always a concern and brings many benefits, it may mean that a person may be chosen based on their kin relationships rather than whether they are best suited for the position. Public officials may also feel uncomfortable reporting their families for corrupt acts, even when they are required to do so.

⁵ Robert Klitgaard, 'BSG Working Paper Series: On culture and corruption' (July 2017) BSG-WP-2017/020, p.6-7. Available: <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-05/BSG-WP-2017-020.pdf>.

⁶ For further examples, see Kahneman's six key effects that can influence individuals in participating in corruption: Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), p.3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Firth, S, *Instability in The Pacific Islands: A Status Report* (2018). Available: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/instability-pacific-islands-status-report>.

⁹ Grant and Pfeiffer, "Overcoming collective action problems through anti-corruption messages," *Discussion Paper 77*, Australian National University, February (2019), p11. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3333475>.

¹⁰ Ibid.



Improving public sector effectiveness and efficiency and motivating public officials to act with integrity

Encouraging public officials to act with integrity and perform their responsibilities effectively and efficiently require both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It may also require knowledge of particular behavioural norms and the ways in which such norms influence individuals in order to cultivate a work environment where individuals are encouraged to act ethically.

Intrinsic motivation refers to how people may be motivated to work more effectively if they feel satisfied, engaged, and interested in their work.¹¹ To encourage greater intrinsic motivation, ensure that those hired are motivated to act ethically and with integrity. Ensuring a work culture that fosters teamwork and friendship among staff is achievable by, for example, being transparent when setting assignments or praising achievements. This can encourage and motivate staff to work effectively and efficiently.¹² Public officials who feel challenged and find that their work is meaningful are also less likely to take sick leave and more likely to remain in the institution.¹³

Extrinsic motivation refers to encouragement through external factors, such as the promise of rewards or the threat of punishment. Examples of rewards include publishing the names of top-performing individuals or developing an annual integrity award to highlight an individual who has performed effectively and acted with integrity.¹⁴ Developing or strengthening internal regulations or controls that set out consequences for unethical behaviour can also help motivate public officials. In addition, putting in place mechanisms that enable citizen feedback on services delivered can also help motivate individuals and deter them from engaging in corrupt acts.

In addition, some countries in the Pacific have Right to Information (RTI) schemes that allow the public to request information held by the government. In the Pacific, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Palau, and Vanuatu have formally adopted RTI laws, and it is anticipated that seven additional PICs may adopt RTI laws in the near future.¹⁵ RTI laws are a powerful tool in the fight against corruption, especially as it pertains to the public sector, as RTI gives everyone the right to access information held by public bodies. RTI reflects the principle that all information held by governments and other public institutions is public information and holds public officials to account.¹⁶ Knowing that such schemes are in place may also motivate public officials to act more ethically.

Addressing behavioural norms may also contribute to countering corruption and improving public sector effectiveness. As discussed earlier, there are many reasons that people behave corruptly or ineffectively, including family pressures and a belief that everyone is equally participating in such behaviour. Targeting social norms may require creating environments where public officials feel they may act independently from the group and encouraging those individuals to inspire and mobilize others to follow.¹⁷

Recommendations

Influence behavioural norms

- Consider internal regulations that require public officials to take individual responsibility for their actions, such as signing off on a particular procurement;
- Provide trainings to help public officials internalize the importance of their role in serving the public interest;

¹¹ OECD, 'Measuring employee engagement,' 2021, p.7. Available: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/a31c208c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/a31c208c-en>; Nohria, N, Groysberg, B and Lee, L, 'Employee Motivation: A Powerful New Model' (2008) *Harvard Business Review*. Available: <https://hbr.org/2008/07/employee-motivation-a-powerful-new-model>.

¹² OECD, *Ibid*.

¹³ Raballand, G and Rajaram, A, 'Behavioral Economics and Public Sector Reform: An Accidental Experiment and Lessons from Cameroon' (2013) *Policy Research Working Papers*. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-6595>.

¹⁴ Astana Civil Service Hub, 'Global and Regional Trends in Civil Service Development' (2016) p.22. Available https://www.astanacivilservicehub.org/uploads/research_pdf/GlobalandRegional%20trends_in_civil_service_development.pdf; Masud, MO, 'Calling citizens, improving the State: Pakistan's Citizen Feedback Monitoring Program, 2008–2014' (2015) *Princeton University*. Available: https://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/successfulsocieties/files/Pakistan%20Calling%20Citizens_ToU_1.pdf.

¹⁵ UNODC/UNDP, *Information Note: Right to Information in the Pacific* (2020), p.1. Available at: <https://rb.gy/uva0jw>.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ Jackson, D and Köbis, N, 'Anti-corruption through a social norms lens' (2018) p.36-39. Available: <https://www.u4.no/publications/anti-corruption-through-a-social-norms-lens>.

- Require all public officials to sign integrity commitments when they join the public sector;¹⁸
- Consider requiring conflict of interest declarations to mitigate the possibility that public officials feel they must reciprocate a favour with favourable treatment;
- Consider a policy that prohibits public officials from working in the same team as their family members.
- Ensure managers and supervisors are trained to support and cultivate an environment where public officials are motivated to act ethically and if not, have the power and opportunity to consider recommending different responsibilities, roles or tasks.

Encourage intrinsic motivation

- Integrate public sector motivation into recruitment by requiring that successful candidates are those who aspire to help the public and are committed to act with integrity. This will likely involve open recruitment processes that encourage highly motivated individuals to apply and asking questions at interviews that gauge motivation. Ensure that this is followed through in evaluations that review public officials' performance based, in part, on whether they have acted with integrity;
- Socialize individuals into behaviours that reflect public sector motivation through codes of conduct that outline ethical behaviour and trainings to help public officials internalize the important role they play and the impact their actions have on citizens;
- Consider circulating staff satisfaction and engagement surveys to understand why some public officials may feel less satisfied, unsupported or unsafe in their roles and then work to address those areas. This may involve asking questions regarding whether public officials are inspired or satisfied by their job and if their job gives them a sense of accomplishment, as well as general questions that could affect a person's wellbeing. For example, if public officials report feeling isolated at work, consider periodic check-ins, team meetings and team building exercises, as well as encouraging employees to take the time to build their social networks;
- Incentivize public officials to behave effectively by offering integrity rewards for stellar performance or a yearly prize where fellow staff members can nominate their colleagues;
- Develop strong internal regulations that outline consequences for unethical behaviour;
- Implement simple checks that provide feedback to staff on their performance. This could include sending feedback forms to members of the public who have received government services. As well as monitoring for poor performance, this gives managers and supervisors the opportunity to reward staff who receive positive responses;
- Create anonymous places or boxes for public officials to share feedback and report potential corruption. Responses may be reviewed by an ethics or corruption prevention committee who can then take appropriate action;
- Promote clear guidelines for the reporting of wrongdoing, along with frameworks that protect those who report;
- Ensure that public officials are aware of reporting requirements so that they may be further motivated to act effectively and with integrity and report alleged corruption if it occurs;
- Explain the existing RTI framework and any requirements to provide the public with access to information. By making this known and explaining such schemes to public officials (including through dedicated trainings), they will understand that the work they produce may be subject to public scrutiny, leading to improved performance.

¹⁸ OECD, Behavioural Insights for Public Integrity : *Harnessing the Human Factor to Counter Corruption* (2018). Available :https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264297067-en/1/2/4/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/9789264297067-en&_csp_=fd64598bbabe4dc0fc12b1a0dc3e-197b&itemGO=oeed&itemContentType=book