

Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail—Systemic Corruption as a Collective Action Problem

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With an increased awareness of the detrimental effects of corruption on development, strategies to fight it are now a top priority in policy circles. Yet, in countries ridden with systemic corruption, few successes have resulted from the investment. On the basis of an interview study conducted in Kenya and Uganda—two arguably typically thoroughly corrupt countries—we argue that part of an explanation to why anticorruption reforms in countries plagued by widespread corruption fail is that they are based on a theoretical mischaracterization of the problem of systemic corruption. More specifically, the analysis reveals that while contemporary anticorruption reforms are based on a conceptualization of corruption as a principal–agent problem, in thoroughly corrupt settings, corruption rather resembles a collective action problem. This, in turn, leads to a breakdown of any anticorruption reform that builds on the principal–agent framework, taking the existence of noncorruptible so-called principals for granted.

Introduction

If you drive on the beautiful roads in the mountains surrounding Cape Town in South Africa, you will eventually—and in the middle of nowhere—reach a road toll station with a sign on it stating: “This is a corruption-free zone.” Similar signs can be found outside the Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Nairobi, on the doors of the Mwanza health office in Tanzania, as well as in many other places on the African continent. While these signs do not necessarily tell the truth, they still give us an important key to understanding the real-life context of many African societies. If you have to explicitly state that a certain place is a corruption-free zone, this should say a lot about how epidemic corruption is perceived to be in society at large. More specifically, this should lead us to suspect that corruption is not the exception to the rule, but *the* rule. While to some maybe little more than a technical detail, we argue that this empirical insight can help us solve the puzzle in focus of this article, namely: *Why does corruption in countries plagued by systemic corruption prevail despite a large number of efforts to fight it?*

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In recent years the fight against corruption—commonly understood as something similar to the “misuse of public office for private gain”—has become a major industry, involving the majority of international organizations (Médard 2002; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006). Consequently, during the last 15 years, the majority of countries ridden with widespread corruption—to a significant extent located in the developing regions of the world—have initiated anticorruption reforms, supported by the international community. To date, however, few successes have resulted from the investment in the countries most severely plagued by corruption. As a consequence, the majority of these countries remain more or less as corrupt as before the anticorruption reforms were initiated. In fact, in some of the countries ridden with widespread corruption, the problem even seems to have become *worse* along with the efforts to curb it (Fjeldstad and Isaksen 2008; Johnston 2005; Lawson 2009; Meagher 2005; Svensson 2005).

On the basis of an interview study conducted in Kenya and Uganda—two arguably typically thoroughly corrupt countries—this article suggests that at least part of an explanation to why anticorruption reforms in countries ridden with rampant corruption have largely failed is that they are based on a *theoretical mischaracterization of the problem of systemic corruption*. More specifically, quite in line with the insights offered by scholars such as William L. Miller, Åse B. Grødeland, and Tatyana Y. Koshechkina (2001), Rasma Karklins (2005), and William L. Miller (2006) in their study of the nature of corruption in the systemically corrupt postcommunist Europe,¹ the analysis reveals that while contemporary anticorruption reforms are based on a conceptualization of systemic (as well as nonsystemic) corruption as a principal–agent problem, systemic corruption in fact primarily much more closely resembles a collective action problem. As a collective action problem, systemic corruption reveals radically different characteristics than predicted by principal–agent theory. As such, it also demands radically different solutions. Most importantly—as the interview data exploring the motivational structure guiding the population (including public officials of different ranks, as well as ordinary citizens) in the choice between corrupt and noncorrupt behavior in systemically corrupt countries effectively reveals—in line with the logic of collection action theory, we cannot assume the existence of “principled principals,” willing to hold corrupt officials accountable, such as suggested by the principal–agent framework. Rather, the rewards of corruption—and hence the existence of actors willing to enforce reform—should be expected to depend critically on how many other individuals in the same society that are expected to be corrupt. To the extent that corruption is the expected behavior, at least the short-term benefits of corruption are likely to outweigh the costs. Consequently, insofar as corruption is the expected behavior in a particular society, we should expect the key instruments to curb corruption in line with the principal–agent anticorruption framework—that is, monitoring devices

and punishment regimes—to be largely ineffective since there will simply be no actors that have an incentive to enforce them. Important to note is that this holds true even if we assume perfect information and even if everyone condemns corruption and realizes that a less corrupt outcome would be more beneficial for the society at large. In short, in a context in which corruption is the rule rather than the exception, any anticorruption reform is likely to turn into a collective action problem of the “second order” (Ostrom 1998). Ultimately, since the supposed “principled principal(s)” are also corrupt and not acting in the interest of the society but instead pursuing their own narrow self-interests, anticorruption reforms based on the principal–agent framework will invariably fail.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section we explore the logic of contemporary anticorruption reforms in greater detail, showing that the global anticorruption agenda has most closely followed the policy recommendations derived from the principal–agent framework, hence taking the existence of “principled principals” for granted. Next, we discuss some alternative but still inadequate ways of understanding the overall failure of contemporary anticorruption reforms in countries ridden with widespread corruption. On the basis of in-depth interviews with more than 60 Kenyan and Ugandan respondents, ranging from high-level public officials (including officials working in anticorruption agencies) to local NGO representatives and journalists, we then demonstrate that corruption in countries with widespread corruption is to a significant extent conceived of as a collective action problem. The interviewees were selected as informants who share a professional commitment to working on corruption and anticorruption issues. In order not to steer the respondents in any specific direction, and hence better be able to capture the “true” character of corruption, we asked the respondents to describe the problem of corruption in their respective country contexts without reservation or guidance.² We conclude the article by summarizing our argument and spelling out some potential alternative policy implications for the future fight against corruption.

The Fight against Corruption

With an increased awareness of the detrimental effects of corruption on development, strategies to fight corruption are now a top priority in policy circles around the world (Médard 2002; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006). While at the rhetoric level, much has been said about fitting anticorruption reforms to specific country settings, the most frequent approach has until today been to use the “tool kits” of ideas provided by the international community in line with the logic of a “one-size-fits-all” approach (Kpundeh 2004, 127). More specifically, as a large number of researchers before us have demonstrated, anticorruption efforts in most developing countries have commonly followed the logic of *principal–agent theory* (Andvig and Fjeldstad 2001; Ivanov 2007; Johnston 2005; Lawson 2009; Riley 1998).

The principal–agent theory situates the analysis of corruption in the interaction and interrelations that exist within and outside public bodies and is based on two key assumptions: (1) that a goal conflict exists between so-called *principals* (who are typically assumed to embody the public interest) and *agents* (who are assumed to have a preference in favor of corrupt transactions insofar as the benefits of such transactions outweigh the costs) and (2) that agents have more information than the principals, which results in an *information asymmetry* between the two groups of actors (Klitgaard 1988; Rose-Ackerman 1978; Williams 1999). More specifically, in line with this view, a collective body of actors is assumed to be the principal who delegates the performance of some government task to another collective body of actors, the agents. As in any situation where authority is being delegated, the problem from the perspective of the principal is that the agents may acquire specific information about the task at hand that they are not willing to disclose to the principal, or that they have private motivations other than the goal of performing the delegated task. Thus, from the perspective of the principal–agent framework, corruption occurs when an agent betrays the principal’s interest in the pursuit of his or her own self-interest. This betrayal is in turn made possible by the information asymmetry between the two groups of actors.

Depending on the perspective, who is the agent and who is the principal in the principal–agent model may differ. In the classical treatment—which refers to situations of bureaucratic corruption—rulers are the principal and the bureaucracy the agent (Becker and Stigler 1974; Van Rijckeghem and Weder 2001). In line with the less classical perspective, on the other hand, it is not primarily the bureaucrats who need to be controlled, but the ruling elite. In this model—which mainly refers to situations of political corruption—rulers are hence modeled as agents and citizens as principals (Adserà, Boix, and Payne 2003; Besley 2006; Myerson 1993; Persson and Tabellini 2000). In the end, important to note is that—regardless of how the principal–agent relationship is modeled—when applying the principal–agent perspective, analysts assume that the problem of corruption lies exclusively with the agent. The principal–agent model thus always rests on the assumption that the principal will take on the role of controlling corruption (Andvig and Fjeldstad 2001; Galtung and Pope 1999; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006; Rauch and Evans 2000). By implication, if the supposed principal is also corrupt and does not act in the interest of the public good, the principal–agent framework becomes useless as an analytical tool since there will simply be no actors willing to monitor and punish corrupt behavior (Andvig and Fjeldstad 2001).

Ultimately, the policy implications following from the principal–agent framework hold that in order to reduce corruption, the principal should aim at negatively affecting the agent’s motivations to engage in corrupt behavior. This could most effectively be done through control instruments that decrease the level of discretion among agents, limit the monopoly of agents, and increase the level of accountability in the system (Klitgaard

1988). Hence, the policy instruments used have primarily been designed to influence the number of transactions over which public officials at various levels have discretion, the value of the bribes offered (i.e., the scope of gains from each transaction), the probability of being detected, as well as the loss incurred by being detected (i.e., the penalty for corrupt activities) (Klitgaard 1988; Shah 2007). In particular, to “close the loopholes for corruption” (UNDP 2004, 9), the international community prescribes a “holistic anticorruption strategy,” targeted at reducing discretion of public officials through privatization, deregulation, and meritocratic recruitment; reducing monopoly by promoting political and economic competition; increasing accountability by supporting democratization and increased public awareness (for political accountability) and bureaucratization (for administrative accountability); improving salaries of public officials, thereby increasing the opportunity cost of corruption if detected; improving the rule of law so that corrupt bureaucrats and politicians can be prosecuted and punished; and encouraging greater transparency of government decision making through deepening decentralization, increased public oversight through parliament, an independent media, as well as through the creation and encouragement of civil society watchdogs (Galtung 1998; Ivanov 2007; Langseth, Staphenurst, and Pope 1999; Lawson 2009; Transparency International 2000; UN 2004; UNDP 2004; World Bank 2000). In sum, the contemporary global anticorruption agenda involves a large number of institutional reforms aimed at reducing the opportunities and incentives for corruption in line with the logic of the principal-agent framework.

Yet, while it is fair to argue that the international community has been extremely successful in drawing attention to a previously neglected problem, as well as promoting formal institutional and legal reform in a large number of developing countries, most observers agree that these anticorruption efforts have not reached the same level of success when it comes to actually curbing rampant corruption (Brinkerhoff 2000; Doig and Riley 1998; Fjeldstad and Isaksen 2008; Johnston 2005; Kpundeh 2004; Lawson 2009; Meagher 2005; Riley 1998; Svensson 2005; Szeftel 1998). As a consequence, according to all available measures, in most countries that were plagued by widespread corruption before the reforms were initiated, corruption remains rampant even today. The lack of success is not at least evident if we consider the absence of improvement in one of the most widely recognized measures of corruption—that is, Transparency International’s (Various years) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)—for sub-Saharan African countries. Given sub-Saharan Africa’s status as the most thoroughly corrupt region in the world, there is no doubt that the African continent has been the major target of the global anticorruption movement (Kpundeh 2004; Lawson 2009; Médard 2002; Szeftel 1998). Yet, while Global Integrity (2008) ranks the majority of sub-Saharan African countries’ anticorruption laws “very strong”—suggesting that the legal-institutional framework in these countries have all it takes to pave the way

for success—reality tells a very different story. Although variation over time in the CPI should be interpreted with caution, since TI started to collect expert views on corruption in 1998, the average CPI for sub-Saharan African countries has in fact decreased from 3.6 to 2.9, if anything indicating even more rampant corruption today than before the reform packages were introduced. In a similar vein, Global Integrity (2008) estimates the gap between the legal framework and its actual implementation as being “large”—or even “huge”—in the majority of sub-Saharan African countries.

Taken together, contemporary anticorruption reforms in countries ridden with rampant corruption have a rather dull track record when it comes to actually preventing the spread of corruption. More specifically, while the majority of thoroughly corrupt countries now have a strong legal anticorruption framework they still struggle to translate those laws into practice. In fact, in some instances it seems like contemporary anticorruption reforms have not only failed to prevent the persistence of corrupt activities, but have also created *new* opportunities and incentives for corruption (Bäck and Hadenius 2008; Doig and Riley 1998; Montinola and Jackman 2002; Riley 2000; Sung 2004). Since the survival of any norm ultimately depends upon its effective implementation (McCoy and Heckel 2001), there is a great need of an increased understanding of the sources of the failure of contemporary anticorruption reforms when it comes to actually curbing corruption. In the next section, we turn to this issue.

Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail

Researchers and policymakers now seem to agree that the failure of contemporary anticorruption reforms can to a significant extent be understood to be the result of an absence of stakeholders willing to act as “principals” and, as such, enforce existing laws and policies (Amundsen 2006; Johnston 2005; Kpundeh 1998, 2004; Riley 1998; Robinson 1998; World Bank 1994). In short, it simply seems like any real political will—without which anticorruption reforms are bound to fail—is lacking in the majority of countries with rampant corruption (Brinkerhoff 2000; Johnston and Kpundeh 2004; Kpundeh 1998; Riley 1998; Szeftel 1998; UNDP 2004; Williams and Doig 2004; World Bank 2000). Quite contrary to what the principal-agent framework assumes, rather than reporting and punishing corrupt behavior, political leaders, as well as citizens, seem to at least passively maintain the corrupt system. While most regimes taking power more recently in the developing world have denounced the corruption of their predecessors and given a promise to clean things up as part of the justification for their claim on office, reports reveal that many of these anticorruption efforts seem to ultimately have become entangled in the very corrupt networks that they were meant to fight (Ittner 2009; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006). This is not at least evident if we consider the many

high-profile corruption scandals that have taken place in the developing world during recent years, including the Goldenberg and Anglo Leasing scandals in Kenya and the Global Fund scandal in Uganda. That is, while political actors often talk of accountability and integrity, this by itself does not seem to translate into a genuine and credible commitment to detect and penalize unethical behavior. In a similar vein, while it is important not to overlook the masses of people who are collectively rising in defiance of corrupt and abusive governments around the world, in their individual encounters with public officials, the majority of citizens in the end still seem to perpetuate rather than fight corrupt exchanges, even though perhaps not as actively as many political leaders. Across countries plagued by rampant corruption, both the reporting and conviction of corrupt cases remain extremely low (Doig and Riley 1998; Kpundeh 2004; Riley 1998). Moreover, corrupt politicians often stand good chances for reelection (Chang, Golden, and Hill 2007). In fact, to a certain extent, citizens even seem to take active part in corrupt activities by selling their votes to corrupt politicians. In short, at the end of the day, it seems like real-life rulers and citizens are seldom as highly principled principals as the principal-agent model assumes (Aidt 2003; Andvig and Fjeldstad 2001; Bardhan 1997; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Médard 1986; Shleifer and Vishny 1998; Williams 1999).

Since the successful implementation of anticorruption reforms based on the principal-agent framework ultimately relies on the existence of actors willing to hold corrupt officials accountable, the failure of anticorruption reforms in countries with widespread corruption should not come as a surprise. Yet, in the end, as argued by Karklins (2005), only if one understands the incentives for taking part in corrupt activities—and for not acting honestly—can one arrive at promising strategies to bring about change. To be able to provide a better specified explanation to why contemporary anticorruption reforms in countries with rampant corruption have largely failed, we in other words need to incorporate also the individual-level motives that can explain why individuals continue to engage in corrupt activities even though they often possess both the means and the information needed to act differently.

In an attempt to do so, a large number of scholars have argued that the reason why some countries remain more corrupt than others is that the public acceptance of what is commonly understood as corruption varies significantly across cultures (Heidenheimer 2002). According to this argument, what is considered a bribe in the Western context is simply considered a gift in countries with widespread corruption (Bardhan 1997; de Sardan 1999; Hasty 2005; Rose-Ackerman 1999). Yet, as common as this explanation might be—and despite the increasing popularity among international donors to promote “sensitizing” strategies, aimed at teaching the population of thoroughly corrupt countries that corruption is indeed morally wrong—there in fact seems to be decisive moral disapproval of corruption in the majority of countries, including the most corrupt ones.

For example, when asked by the Afrobarometer (2006) whether they consider it “not wrong at all,” “wrong but understandable,” or “wrong and punishable” if a public official: (1) decides to locate a development project in an area where his friends and supporters live, (2) gives a job to someone from his family who does not have adequate qualifications, and (3) demands a favor or an additional payment for some service that is part of his job, a clear majority of Africans deem all three acts both wrong and punishable. Studies conducted in other thoroughly corrupt settings, including postcommunist Europe and India, reveal similar results (Karklins 2005; Miller, Grødeland, and Koshechkina 2001; Nichols, Siedel, and Kasdin 2004; Widmalm 2008). Yet, despite this fact, the typical actor or group of actors living in a thoroughly corrupt setting in the end chooses not to punish corrupt behavior, but instead serves to perpetuate the corrupt system. That is, despite the fact the majority of individuals living in thoroughly corrupt settings are not inherently corrupt, they still seem to be what Miller, Grødeland, and Koshechkina (2001) and Miller (2006) refer to as “corruptible.” In the next section, we show that this corruptibility—and hence the persistence of corruption in countries plagued by rampant corruption—can at least partly be understood as a result of that, in contexts in which corruption is the rule rather than the exception, it to a significant extent shares the characteristics of a collective action problem.

The Collective Action Problem of Corruption

Collective action theories do not necessarily question the potential relevance of effective monitoring and punishment regimes as means to curb corruption such as suggested by the principal-agent framework. Rather, they question the underlying assumption that all societies hold at least one group of actors willing to act like “principals” and, as such, *enforce* such regimes. This is because, quite contrary to what principal-agent theory suggests, collective action theory contests the view that strategic situations always in *themselves* give the actors the answer to the question what strategy is the most rational to opt for. This is particularly true for strategic interaction that takes the form of a multiple-equilibria coordination problem, within the framework of which—unlike in the more commonly put forward single-equilibrium “prisoners dilemma,” which always has a dominant strategy—what action should be taken should be expected to depend on shared expectations about how other individuals will act (Aumann and Dreze 2005; Fehr and Fischbacher 2005; Gintis et al. 2005; Medina 2007; Ostrom 1998; Sen 1967). In particular, the rewards of corruption—and hence the strategy any rational actor is most likely to opt for—should according to this set of theories be expected to depend critically on how many other individuals in the same society that are expected to be corrupt.³ Insofar as corrupt behavior is the expected behavior, *everyone* should be expected to act corruptly, including both the group of actors to whom the principal-agent framework refers to as “agents” and

the group of actors referred to as “principals.” Moreover, important to note is that this should be the case even if the majority of actors morally condemn corrupt practices, as well as realize that they as a collective stand to loose from the ongoing corruption (Karklins 2005). This is because in a “rotten game” in the form of a thoroughly corrupt setting, the short-term costs of being honest are comparatively very high since this will not change the game (Della Porta and Vannucci 1999). Hence, unwilling or incapable of bearing the costs—that is, being a “sucker” (Levi 1988; Rothstein 2005)—people will instead continue to choose corrupt alternatives before noncorrupt ones. More specifically, as was nicely captured by the Swedish Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal (1968, 409) in his work about what he labeled the “soft state” problem in Asia, any self-interested actor will reason like this: “Well, if everybody seems corrupt, why shouldn’t I be corrupt.” Consequently, in a context in which corruption is the expected behavior, monitoring devices and punishment regimes should be largely ineffective since there will simply be no actors that have an incentive to hold corrupt officials accountable. In the end, as should be clear, this structure of incentives leads to what Elinor Ostrom (1998) calls a collective action problem of the “second order” (see also Bates 1988; Rothstein 2000, 2011a, 2011b; Teorell 2007). All the actors may well understand that they would stand to gain from erasing corruption, but because they cannot trust that most other actors will refrain from corrupt practices, they have no reason to refrain from paying or demanding bribes (Rothstein 2011a, 2011b). The incentives to organize a solution to the collective action problem are simply undermined by shared expectations about other actors’ behavior in the sense that the solution is subject to the very incentive problems it is supposed to solve (Bates 1988).

In the remainder of this section, we demonstrate that corruption in Kenya and Uganda—two arguably typical examples of countries plagued by rampant corruption—to a significant extent resembles a collective action problem, within the framework of which actors engage in corrupt behavior not because they morally approve of it or do not understand the negative consequences for society at large, but because as long as they expect everyone else to play foul, they perceive the short-term benefits of engaging in corrupt behavior to be greater than the costs. In terms of one prototypical model of collective action, this game of corruption could be interpreted as an assurance game (Hardin 1995; Sen 1967). According to the logic of this game, everyone prefers that no one cheats (i.e., acts corruptly) as compared to the outcome where everyone plays foul. However, being the sole “sucker” in a corrupt game is the even worse outcome to everyone, which tends to lock the game into the suboptimal “corrupt” equilibrium as long as everyone expects everyone else to be corrupt. Interpreted in these terms, in the first subsection we explore the payoff structure for acting fairly. We then proceed by exploring the payoff structure for playing along with the corrupt game. As we shall see, quite in line with the assurance game, there are great negative payoffs involved

for all actors when it comes to acting fairly as long as corruption is the expected behavior. However, the positive payoffs for acting corruptly appear to vary considerably across groups.

The Costs of Acting Fairly

Why do individual actors living in thoroughly corrupt settings choose not to report and punish corrupt behavior despite the existence of an institutional and legal framework designed to facilitate such actions and despite the fact that they morally condemn it? Quite in line with theories of collective action, the majority of the Kenyan and Ugandan informants interviewed for the purpose of this study bear witness of a real-life context in which it is meaningless to report corruption since this will not make any difference anyway. It is simply the way “things work”:

There is complacency. Everybody does it, so whether it is bad or good everybody does it anyway. Am I the one who is going to change the world? Those are the kind of things you see in the behavior of people.

A lively discussion with two journalists (A and B) explicitly reveals the collective action dilemma character of the engagement in corrupt activities in thoroughly corrupt contexts:

A: People see it [and think it is morally wrong] but have nothing to do. They see it as the order of the day. It has become normal. They don't care because they want to access something and if you want to ease the way of getting it you have to involve corruption and you solve your problems. So it is very hard to eliminate it.

B: . . . I feel guilty at the end of the day but it's the society.

A: Exactly. Because ethically we are not supposed to, but the circumstances. . . .

B: Anyway that is life. . . . Anyway, you look at the surroundings, it is the circumstances. . . . It is that feeling that if I don't take it, it is going to be taken by somebody else.

Important to note is that while, for many people, a sense of meaninglessness is reason enough for not being honest, the costs of acting fairly do seldom stop at this alternative cost. Rather, many of the interviewees bear witness of a real-life context in which acting honestly is not only a waste of time, but brings with it considerable “de facto” costs for individuals at various levels of society, including public officials. For example, public officials who refuse to take advantage of their positions to enrich themselves are regarded as stupid and may even face ridicule:

If you have an office but have not stolen—if you have not helped your family—they are actually going to curse you. . . . So there is a pressure from everybody that you should take as much as possible. In fact, we who don't take are abused and told we are useless.

In fact, [people] laugh at you sometimes when they find you are at a certain level and yet you do not have as much money as they would expect you to have.

... if you get into a state institution and you walk in with one suit and one shamba, and you walk out on your retirement with one suit and one shamba, you will be considered foolish. So you go there and eat. You eat, you yourself, your family, ... You eat on your behalf, but also let some crumbs fall on those who are with you.

While stigmatization and social exclusion are to many a too high price to pay for fighting corruption, the costs of acting fairly in fact go far beyond this. The unwillingness on behalf of ordinary citizens in thoroughly corrupt settings—and especially the poor—to report corruption should be understood in a context in which the state, partly due to corruption, has since long lost the ability to provide public goods on a broader basis (to the extent it ever had the ability). Instead, it is the “big men” that are the main providers of public goods. According to many of the informants, it is within the limits of this vicious circle that people find it too costly to punish corrupt behavior. In short, for the poor, the alternative to punish the corrupt is often no alternative at all since they cannot afford to bite the hand that feeds them:

... people are seeing their relatives and friends in high offices and they don't care how they get the money as long as the money is going to the village and they benefit. ... And in my view that creates a problem of fighting corruption so who will complain?

For someone in the position of need, if someone comes and sorts out school fees for your children which you otherwise could not afford, you are going to praise that guy and say “you are a great guy and doing a good job.” People look at him and say “he is our man.”

For the segment of the population being lucky enough to have a job in the formal sector, the fear of losing one's job, or even life, seems to hold many people back:

[People do not report because] ... they fear losing their jobs. They see it is bad but they fear reporting. The reporting system is corrupt itself.

The laws are there but the implementation is not easy. ... we have enough [resources] ... but the environment is spoilt. We usually make recommendations that such and such public officer should be removed. Now the organisation where he is working sits together and defeats your recommendation so what is that? You go to court, they go behind you. You can see the magistrate frustrate you and buy off the witnesses. They can intimidate them. And too, because corruption is mainly a white collar crime, it means that my juniors would be the ones to testify against me but they fear their jobs and their lives.

... [reporting] is risky because if you are going to do it well you are going to step on some peoples' toes and they are certainly not going to like you. ... For instance, we receive anonymous calls people threatening us telling us “don't do anything about that issue; don't even issue a statement.” And in this country, as for so many other countries in Africa, it is so easy for people to disappear. It is very easy for someone to die under mysterious circumstances. So we move cautiously.

A former public official who lost his job because he reported a corrupt colleague to the Inspectorate of Government bears witness about the

significant and, for most people, unbearable sanctions involved in reporting corrupt practices. On the question whether it was worth it, the clear answer is no. And of course he would not do it again: "If you lose your job and no one protects you it does not make any sense." Why, then, did the other people in his position not support him by reporting or complaining? The answer is clear: ". . . the others feared. If you are a whistleblower in Uganda they sack you. . . ."

In short, as predicted by collective action theory being a whistleblower in a context in which corruption is the rule rather than the exception is related to extremely high risks and small returns. Perhaps the most telling story in this regard is the one about the faith of John Githongo, Kenya's former Permanent Secretary in Charge of Governance and Ethics under President Mwai Kibaki. When Githongo accepted the post, he signed to be an "anticorruption champion," running a unit working out of the State House and enjoying direct access to the president's office. However, soon enough Githongo became aware that—to the extent that he actually fulfilled his duties and acted like the watchdog he had signed to be—not only his career but even his life was at risk. Githongo was even told that the Kenyan intelligence would "put something in [his] tea" if he went public with what he knew about the political elite's involvement in corruption (Wrong 2009, 222). In 2006, Githongo eventually had to flee the country after having realized that even President Kibaki and his closest men had turned his back on him.

While the story about the faith of Githongo may sound like it is taken from a bad movie, it by and large reflects the situation of actual and potential whistleblowers in contexts ridden by rampant corruption. In the end, according to the majority of the informants interviewed for the purpose of this study the fear of repercussions—together with a feeling of being part of a vicious circle of corruption that nobody alone can afford to break out of—seem to be the main motivators for not reporting and actively challenging corruption. As long as most people expect most other people to be corrupt, the relative—and in many instances *absolute*—costs of playing fairly and actively challenge corruption are simply too high. However, this is not to say that the benefits of being engaged in corrupt practices are equally distributed across groups. In the next subsection, we explore this matter further.

The Benefits of Acting Corruptly

Quite in line with collective action theory, the majority of the informants interviewed for the purpose of this study agree that the benefits related to being corrupt are often considerably greater than the costs. However, when it comes to the distribution of benefits derived from acting corruptly, there still seems to be huge discrepancies across groups. The closer to the top you find yourself in the hierarchy, the more likely it is that you are going to benefit in *absolute* terms from engaging in corrupt practices,

perhaps even in the long run. At the other extreme you find ordinary citizens, and especially the poor segments of society. Among the members of this group, corruption is not actively supported, but rather pragmatically accepted for the simple reason that it facilitates life, either by maximizing efficiency in achieving objectives which would otherwise be out of bounds, or by minimizing risks, such as avoiding trouble with, for instance, the police or the courts. In both cases, corruption is used as a means for bypassing unpredictable (or predictably inefficient) institutions:

... most people will be doing it involuntarily, because if you look at the institutions which are taking the bribes, it's the police which means they are in a situation where they are threatened with some sort of punishment or some sort of pain if they do not pay the bribes. There's a little bit of coercion in it, but there's also the element that people are trying to maybe skip the queue or save time or whatever by paying bribes ...

The only way to get a service is simply to pay a bribe:

It is becoming a culture that people have this idea in their head that if you are going to that office, you have to pay some money to get a service. Everyone has that, even me ... Maybe I am promoting it, but if you don't do it you will lose. It will be at your own cost.

Bribes are bad but sometimes it is necessary to bribe, especially when you have attempted to get what you wanted and you could not get it. And if someone tells you if you do ABCD you will actually get it. And when you do it and you get it tomorrow it will be the order of the day, the fashion.

Like me, after completing my course I don't have the transcript in my hand but I know that at the next level, if I go there, people will tell you "your results have disappeared." Assume I am called for an interview tomorrow and I have to come with all my documents. Should I miss the interview or part with 10.000 USH? So sometimes you are in a state where you are actually forced to, yet you know that you are not supposed to.

... bribery still pays off and if it continues to pay off. Like you wouldn't get that service without paying. If that continues then how can you fight corruption?

Again, the collective action problem of corruption in contexts ridden with rampant corruption reveals itself:

... everybody knows that it is a wrong thing. But there is also the general consensus that it is a system ... So it's not that people are not willing to participate in eradicating this, but the prevailing environment, the institution, the process that they go through in fighting this thing is in itself more costly than the bribe they give to the policemen.

For many ordinary citizens, it is especially expectations about what the elites will do that drive their corrupt behavior—that make them feel trapped:

... even the people see that the State has failed to commit to its own pledges. Then they say "who are we?" If the State is allowing people like this [high-level public officials] to continue with looting, why should I be stopped from giving

a clinical officer a hundred shillings to get faster health care services? People say “go to hell.” It’s pragmatic . . . The way of living . . .

The regime is becoming oppressive and there is a lot of corruption with impunity and the rest of the public is saying “what can we do?”

Corruption somehow started from the top. When you had those ministers taking money, . . . one who has been there for three years and is now a millionaire. So what can other people do? They join the rest.

In other words, if we are to believe the Ugandan and Kenyan informants, the behavior of elites seems to serve as the main heuristics also for other groups in society. Thoroughly corrupt systems can in this sense be described as systems in which the “fish rots from the head down” (cf. Rothstein 2011b). Yet, important to note is that this does not make elites less affected by the “rules of the game” than any other group of actors. That is, even elites are in the end subject to a system in which the costs of acting fairly by far outweigh the costs of being corrupt. However, having said this, the majority of the informants still describe a situation in which the elites ultimately seem to be the “winners” of the corrupt game. More specifically, a large number of informants describe a system in which particularly high-level officials benefit more than any other group in society from perpetuating the status quo. What ultimately drives high-level officials to engage in corrupt practices is, according to the informants, greed rather than survival. Money is simply “too sweet to resist”:

It is greed that makes officials become corrupt. They don’t have feelings for others. . . . They are self-centered.

They [i.e., public officials] will just say “I will get something good out of it, I am going to buy a car, I am going to build my house.” It is a selfish thing, greedy. A greedy sense of attitude. Selfishness.

It is not poverty. It is just a question of greed, just bad manners. Wanting to amass and amass and amass, for yourself and then you also want to bring in your brothers, your friends. . . .

Another informant draws a similar picture:

[Political elites] see corruption as a paying enterprise. It is no longer risky, unless maybe you have misappropriated very little. The moment we are talking about huge sums of money, in case the scandal gets into the public limelight the only thing you can suffer is maybe that your name is appearing in the media reports. But it will stop at that. What you will only suffer is embarrassment. And that is not deterring many. If you look at the situation where I am able to misappropriate 500 million USH and that will enable me to do lifetime investments even for my children and grandchildren, the fact that you are going to talk about me and the public sees me as having done something unethical, it will be quickly forgotten. And I will be able to access my loot and start enjoying it. And even some of those people who would be against me I would even use some part of that money to buy them, to buy their loyalty, to buy their friendship back. So that is what is happening in this country.

Taken together, drawing upon the cases of Uganda and Kenya, the two last subsections of this article have illustrated the collective action problem

character of corruption in countries ridden with rampant corruption. As demonstrated, in such a context, very few actors see any point in reporting and punishing corrupt behavior. The relative and absolute costs of doing so are simply too high. In addition, at least in the short term, the benefits of passively or actively engaging in corrupt activities seem to outweigh the costs, making most people choose corrupt alternatives before noncorrupt ones. In fact, the interviews reveal how in many instances the amounts paid to venal officials are often surprisingly small compared to the sorts of relative, short-term gains realized by those who pay the bribes. This short-term, comparative advantage of being part of the corrupt game in thoroughly corrupt settings is not at least evident if we consider the poorer segments of the population to whom the difference between paying and not paying a few dollars in bribes can in fact be the difference between life and death in the short term. Similarly, if yet at a different level, for a public official, the difference between reporting and not reporting a corrupt colleague is in many instances the difference between whether or not being able to keep one's job and, by extension, being able to support the extended family. However, important to say in the light of these results is that far from all actors seem to benefit as much from perpetuating the corrupt system in *absolute* terms. Rather, thoroughly corrupt systems seem to distribute the benefits of corruption unequally across groups, top officials being the group gaining the most in absolute terms and hence having the greatest incentives to perpetuate the status quo. In the final section of this article, we discuss the policy implications following from these empirical insights.

Summary and Conclusions

The general idea behind our "bête noire" in this article, that is, the principal-agent theory, is the following. If only formal institutions that negatively influence agents' expected gross gain of being corrupt increase the probability of getting caught, as well as increase the size of the penalty if detected are established, the corruption problem will be solved. However, as the overall failure of anticorruption reforms in countries plagued by rampant corruption indicates, this formula seems to work considerably better in theory than in practice. The empirical results revealed in this article give us a potential explanation to why this is the case. More specifically, our study reveals that the overall failure of anticorruption reforms in highly corrupt countries can at least partly be understood as a consequence of that the problem of corruption in such contexts primarily resembles a collective action problem. More specifically, it appears to be a coordination problem, where the equilibrium that emerges depends on shared expectations about others' behavior. The implementation of anticorruption reforms hence turns into a collective action problem of the "second order" (Ostrom 1998; Rothstein 2011a, 2011b; Teorell 2007). Accordingly, even if most people morally disapprove of corruption and

are fully aware of its negative consequences for society at large, very few rational actors have a clear-cut interest in establishing or defending clean institutions (Falaschetti and Miller 2001). This is because, while corrupt institutions are certainly what George Tsebelis (1990) would call “redistributive” in the sense that they serve as a regressive tax especially on the poor in absolute terms, they are still “efficient” in the sense that for each particular actor or group of actors, the perceived relative (and sometimes even absolute) short-term benefits of sustaining the corrupt status quo outweigh the perceived costs of breaking the existing rules of the game (Rothstein 2011a). Hence, any anticorruption reform based on the assumption that every society holds a group of actors willing to act as “principals” breaks down, such as we have recently witnessed in, for example, many sub-Saharan African countries.

The conceptualization of systemic corruption as a collective action rather than a principal–agent problem has significant policy implications. Quite ironically it might seem, the need for a different type of anticorruption strategy for curbing systemic corruption is even recognized by one of the “founding fathers” of the principal–agent theory of corruption—that is, Robert Klitgaard—even though he does not explicitly refer to systemic corruption as a collective action problem. More specifically, in a more recent piece on how to subvert corruption, Klitgaard (2006) asks:

When systems are thoroughly corrupted, there may be little, if any, political will to reform them. Calling for better agents, improved incentives, better information, more competition, less official discretion, and higher economic and social costs is well and good. But who is going to listen? Who is going to act? The usual anticorruption remedies may not work. Now what?

While contemporary anticorruption research does not provide a clear-cut answer to this question, if we adhere to the logic of the collective action approach, rather than “fixing the incentives,” the important thing will be to change actors’ beliefs about what “all” other actors are likely to do so that most actors expect most other actors to play fairly. Important to note, in this process attempts to “fix the incentives” might even be harmful for the development of noncorrupt institutions. For example, Paul Collier (2000), Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2006), and Rasma Karklins (2005) all argue that failed reform efforts risk invoking a sense of cynicism among the population, further strengthening especially citizens’ feeling of being “trapped” in a corrupt “game.” In fact, according to Elinor Ostrom (1998)—referring to collective action problems in general—the worst of all worlds may be one where external authorities impose rules but are only able to achieve weak monitoring and sanctioning since a mild degree of external monitoring discourages the formation of social norms, while also making it attractive for some actors to deceive and defect and take the relative low risk of being caught. Moreover, in line with the logic of collective action theory, increased transparency will risk increasing the level of corruption since this will make people even more aware of the problem, encouraging even former noncorrupt actors to take part in

the corrupt game. In short, curing the problem of corruption with the wrong medicine will—according to theory and similarly to what can be witnessed empirically in especially the developing regions of the world—risk leading to an even worse outcome than was the case initially.

Hoping to be able to avoid any further strengthening of already thoroughly corrupt systems, on the basis of knowledge about other types of collective action problems, scholars have now suggested that what is needed to successfully fight corruption in countries plagued by systemic corruption is a more revolutionary type of change. In line with this perspective, as argued by Larry Diamond (2007, 119):

Endemic corruption is not some flaw that can be corrected with a technical fix or a political push. It is the way that the system works, and it is deeply embedded in the norms and expectations of political and social life. Reducing it to less destructive levels—and keeping it there—requires revolutionary change in institutions.

In particular, in order to successfully reduce the level of malfeasance in countries plagued by rampant corruption, the whole system will need to be tilted from an equilibrium characterized by what is commonly referred to as “particularism” (Mungiu-Pippidi 2006), a “limited access order” (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009), or a “partial” system of rule (Rothstein and Teorell 2008) to an equilibrium characterized by the opposite, that is, “universalism,” an “open access order,” or an “impartial” system of rule (Collier 2000; Johnston 2005; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006; North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009).

Empirical findings based on the experiences of successful transitions from thoroughly corrupt to significantly less corrupt systems of rule in Sweden, Denmark, the United States—and, more recently, Hong Kong and Singapore—support the argument that a “big push” involving all major political, economic, and social institutions is indeed necessary (Arnold 2003; Frisk Jensen 2008; Root 1996; Rothstein 2011a, 2011b). In these countries, wherever individuals looked after the massive reforms had taken place, they realized that there was what Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) would call a new “game in town.” As in all countries experiencing low levels of corruption (or, as a matter of fact, the successful solution to any other type of collective action problem), this new “game” in town was characterized by the combination of both *formal* and *informal* mechanisms of control in the form of, on the one hand, formal monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms and, on the other, reciprocity and trust (Ostrom 1990, 1998; Uslaner 2008). Thus, the new rules of the game reached far beyond the existence of formal monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms to include also shared expectations holding that most other people could in fact be trusted to be honest. In particular, countries that have successfully transferred from corrupt to less corrupt systems of rule seem to share the characteristic that actors at the very top of the system—that is, high-level public officials—have served as role models. In both Hong Kong and Singapore, corruption was successfully fought from “above,” implying

that the members of the ruling elite themselves set an example by changing their behavior beyond the rhetorical level (Root 1996).

Yet, to the extent that revolutionary change supported from above is in fact the solution to the corruption problem in thoroughly corrupt contexts, we still need to answer the question of how to change the basic “modus operandi” of a society’s institutions from “particularism-personalism-partiality” to “universalism-impersonalism-impartiality.” That is, we need to know how societies can break out of “social traps” such as the one of corruption. Unfortunately, while there is now a general consensus holding that variation in institutional quality is the major source of cross-country differences in economic growth and prosperity (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Johnson 2001; Bates 2008; Collier and Gunning 1999; Knack and Keefer 1995; North 1990; Rodrik, Subramanian, and Trebbi 2004), so far the question of how revolutionary changes in institutions can be achieved has attracted surprisingly little attention among social scientists. In fact, in the recently published *Handbook of Political Economy* (Weingast and Wittman 2006), to which a large number of the leading scholars within the field have contributed, none of the 67 chapters deals with the problem of how a negative institutional equilibrium can be exchanged for a more socially desirable one. As a consequence, there is still very limited knowledge when it comes to the question of how the transition from a corrupt equilibrium to a less corrupt one can be made (Falaschetti and Miller 2001; Rothstein 2005). While noncorrupt institutions operate in a few advanced contemporary countries and only in recent times, we in short know surprisingly little about what led to these successes (Greif 2006; Rothstein 2011a). Given the devastating economic, political, and social impact of corrupt systems of rule, one of the most important tasks for future research is hence to find out more about the origins of high-quality institutions. Which are the factors that can explain why some countries have successfully been able to establish institutions that benefit the larger society, while others seem to be more or less stuck with thoroughly corrupt systems of rule? Until we learn the answer to this question, the international community will have to do its very best to serve as an “external principal.” In line with the logic of collective action theory, at the core of such a strategy would be the effective signaling of that the formal mechanisms of control put in place are not constituting a mere facade.

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Notes

1. However, neither of these scholars discusses the theoretical implications of such an observation in any greater detail.
2. For safety reasons, the informants were promised anonymity.
3. For a partly related discussion on how the behavior of supposed “agents” in the form of bureaucrats is to some extent motivated by expectations of other agents’ behavior, see Mishra (2006), Lui (1986), Cadot (1987), and Andvig and Moene (1990). However, important to note is that within the framework of collective action theory, the power of expectations should be expected to extend far beyond the behavior of bureaucrats as supposed “agents.”

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