



Executive
Non-Departmental
Public Body sponsored by:  Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

Doing anti-corruption democratically

WFD anti-corruption and integrity series, 2

Heather Marquette

Professor of Development Politics, University of Birmingham

May 2021

Rights, acknowledgements and disclaimer

All rights in this work, including copyright, are owned by Westminster Foundation for Democracy and are protected by applicable UK and international laws. This work cannot be copied, shared, translated, or adapted - in full or in part - without permission from Westminster Foundation for Democracy. All rights reserved.

The publication '*Doing anti-corruption democratically*' was made possible through funding received from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

The publication has been drafted by Heather Marquette, Professor in Development Politics, University of Birmingham and published in May 2021 as part of the *WFD anti-corruption and integrity series*. The author appreciates the peer review comments received from Graeme Ramshaw, Nic Cheeseman and Franklin De Vrieze.

The views expressed in the paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of or endorsed by the institutions mentioned in the paper nor the UK Government.

The *WFD anti-corruption and integrity series 2021* brings together the applied research on aspects of corruption and anti-corruption. The following policy briefs are scheduled:

1. Rethinking strategies for an effective parliamentary role in combatting corruption, Phil Mason, April 2021.
2. Doing anti-corruption democratically, Heather Marquette, May 2021.
3. Comparative analysis of the UK Bribery Act 2010 and anti-bribery legislation in Ukraine, Indonesia and Kenya, Rob McCusker, May 2021.
4. Anti-corruption and gender - the role of women's political participation, Ortrun Merkle, May 2021.
5. Corruption proofing of legislation, Khachik Harutyunyan, June 2021.
6. National anti-corruption strategies and the role of parliaments, Franklin De Vrieze, September 2021.

There's a lot of concern right now about corruption, democracy and development, and yet it can sometimes seem like a space where agendas compete rather than complement each other.

[We're told that corruption poses an existential threat to democracy](#), but we're also told that [fighting corruption poses a threat to democracy](#). We're told that [corruption is deeply damaging for developmental progress](#), while also being told that we don't need to worry about it because [evidence shows that countries have developed without tackling corruption](#). We're told that we need to 'do development differently' by 'working with the grain' of political settlements often built around corrupt networks that exclude ordinary citizens, and we're told we need to 'do development democratically' to work against the grain of - that's right, political settlements built around corrupt networks of powerful elites.

Despite almost 30 years of the global anti-corruption agenda, the consensus seems to be that something is clearly not working. From 2012 to 2020 (when data is comparable), [Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index](#) (CPI) suggests worrying trends: while 26 countries have seen improvements during this period, 22 others have seen significant decreases, while the rest have seen no improvements for the whole period. Research papers looking at [how anti-corruption efforts have failed](#) are common, backed by two extensive evidence reviews commissioned by DFID (now FCDO) - one in [2012](#) and another in [2015](#). This has led to a plethora of papers with 'rethinking corruption' in their title, with Paul Heywood documenting several in a 2018 paper on '[Combating corruption in the twenty-first century: new approaches](#)'. In June 2021, the [UN will host a special session of the General Assembly against corruption](#), and its '[common position to address global corruption](#)' sets out the current scale of the challenge as well as explaining how 'it has become increasingly clear that measures taken to prevent corruption have been insufficient'.

Questions about the effectiveness of anti-corruption interventions have happened at the same time as the rise of the '[doing development differently \(DDD\)](#)' and '[thinking](#)

[and working politically \(TWP\)](#)' agendas in global development. Current thinking on both anti-corruption and DDD/TWP have at their heart a call to move away from unhelpful 'best practice' thinking that assumes every country can '[get to Denmark](#)' using the same one-size-fits-all approaches to governance reforms. While this means that anti-corruption and DDD/TWP share some common strengths, they also share common weaknesses, particularly a tendency for policymakers and practitioners to [extrapolate too much from limited evidence](#) and a tendency for researchers to overclaim about the relevance of their research for policy and practice, whether intentional or not.

It would be easy to conclude that it's only possible to work on corruption or on democracy or on development, but not all three at once. If you did try you probably wouldn't be able to [think and work politically](#) because how can you be '[politically smart and locally led](#)' if your starting point is an idealised, often (but not always) Western democratic governance model that may or may not exist in the 'real world'? Despite the useful shift in recent years away from unrealistic, linear models for building strong states and economies, what we seem to be left with is an unhelpful muddle of theory and practice where competing normative narratives continue to battle it out in global research and policy spaces, and in geopolitics too.

From a single '[golden thread](#)' we now have what can often feel like a tangled ball of yarn bringing together different schools of thought and practice that feel like they should be more complementary than they are. The reality is though that democracy and anti-corruption are complementary, that we can 'do anti-corruption democratically' in rich or poor countries in ways that are politically informed. This policy brief is an attempt to unpick this tangled ball of yarn and to make the case for how '[doing anti-corruption differently](#)' means we need to think about 'doing anti-corruption democratically' too. The rest of this note works through these arguments, concluding that if we care about democracy we *must* tackle corruption, and we can do anti-corruption democratically, as long as we're much more honest about the challenges and clearer on what matters most and why.

Doesn't evidence (and history) tell us that non-democracies are better at development and at tackling corruption?

A large body of evidence (too large to go into in any depth here) looks at the relationship between democracy and growth and finds, on balance, that economic growth is not dependent on the existence of democracy and that [aspects of democracy may have a 'growth-retarding' effect](#). While most of the world's wealthiest countries are also democracies, their path to growth was rarely one that started out with regimes that were already democratic. Historically and empirically, economic growth has tended to depend on protection of property rights and bureaucratic capacity, and evidence shows that authoritarian countries can provide these. Indeed, these are key features in the 'developmental states' literature, looking at the success of the so-called East Asian 'tigers' - Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan where petty corruption was suppressed but 'productive' corruption flourished - the kind that leads to deal-making, building political connections, peddling influence and 'revolving doors' between political and business worlds and so on.

Evidence also indicates that, as [Robert J Barro suggests](#), 'democracies that arise without prior economic development - sometimes because they are imposed from outside - tend not to last... advanced western countries would contribute more to the welfare of poor nations by exporting their economic systems... If economic freedom can be established in a poor country, then growth would be encouraged, and the country would tend eventually to become more democratic on its own'. Or, as [Nicholas Charron and Victor Lapuente](#) explain - authoritarian countries perform better than younger democracies, and that 'while you are poor, a dictator may provide better [quality of government]; on the contrary, when you achieve [a] certain level of development, good bureaucracy and administrative services and lower corruption are better provided by democratic rulers'.

Other research suggests that democracy creates new opportunities for corruption, through the rise of 'political machines' that allow elites to control who has access to power and growth

opportunities, or what's been called 'money politics', as [Sarah Chayes](#) discusses in the United States, [Jon Moran](#) in East Asia and [Wale Adebani and Ebenezer Obadare](#) in Nigeria (where they also coin the fantastically descriptive term 'competitive thievery'). Adebani and Obadare also show how anti-corruption campaigns can be used as tools against political opponents in democracies, something that's a feature of many [populist campaigns](#) in particular. In more recent years, we've seen a new term - '[developmental patrimonialism](#)' to describe contexts where authoritarian governments utilise patron-client networks in ways that encourage industrial policies for high economic growth while limiting political rights, with [Rwanda and Ethiopia](#) being the main examples.

Having said all of this, there is also a body of evidence that suggests that this presents a '[false trade-off](#)' between democracy and development. [Daron Acemoglu and others](#) find that democracy is compatible with economic growth and that some democratic institutions are important for supporting growth-enhancing activities. [Carl Henrik Knutsen](#) reviews a large body of literature looking at the relationship between democracy and economic growth and finds, as others have recently, that 'either that there is no significant effect of democracy on growth, or that there is a significant positive effect'. As [Sarah Repucci](#) argues, 'Democracy is clearly not the only factor behind good economic performance, but more often than not, it provides the long-term political stability and corrective mechanisms that form a foundation for safe investment and steady growth.' She refers to data that suggests that democracy and protection of human rights provide an important foundation for businesses to develop and to attract investment, and that too much is made of 'exceptions and outliers' in the literature.

An overreliance on exceptions and outliers is common in the policy-oriented literature on democracy, corruption and development. Two cases in particular are often referred to as evidence that countries can develop without

tackling corruption (or that corruption can even aid development), explained in part by lack of democracy: [China](#) and [Rwanda](#). Both are problematic cases to use to make this claim, however. For example, both countries have unique features that give their leadership greater room for manoeuvre than most other countries, if not all: China's size and its population, its natural resources, its military power and its geostrategic significance mean that it attracts significant foreign direct investment regardless of its governance environment. Rwanda's experience of genocide and, particularly, the ways in which the international donor community has offered mostly unquestioning support, have also given its leadership significant room for manoeuvre in terms of controlling corruption, particularly at the petty/bureaucratic level. In other words, China and Rwanda's economic successes are explained more by context-specific features rather than a shared lack of political rights or having more of the 'right kind' of corruption that is growth-enhancing. Many other non-democracies that are not so lucky (or terribly unlucky, of course, in Rwanda's case) are also some of the worst performers on both corruption and development indicators. For every China, there is a DRC; for every Rwanda, there is a Haiti.

Both countries are also now showing cracks in terms of corruption - with rising inequality, increased capital flight (both licit and illicit), increased tensions between elites and between the state and citizens, and growing concerns about governance and corruption raised by foreign investors. The policy-oriented governance literature does not always reflect these changes, however. In China, for example, [Yuen Yuen Ang](#) has written about the importance for China's economic growth of 'access money' - where business elites buy 'special deals and lucrative rights' from politicians and officials, comparing it to the 'gilded age' in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century. [Minxin Pei](#), on the other hand, has written about how the same sorts of activities are instead a system of collusive 'crony capitalism' embedding (organised) criminality and entrenching elite privilege into China's political system, as was the case in the US's so-called gilded age, with the potential for long-term destabilising impacts.

These sorts of debates tend to be underplayed in the translation from research to policy recommendations where many subtleties in the research regarding tensions and trade-offs disappear.

While [Rwanda's success in tackling petty corruption](#) has been widely recognised, more recently its leaders have been accused of grand corruption outside its own borders, especially in the DRC next door. [Michaela Wrong](#) chronicles this 'looting', quoting an expert who describes Rwanda's DRC operations as a 'mission': 'It wasn't about personal corruption - this was a national money-making effort'. Stopping nurses from taking bribes at home while destabilising your neighbour through grand corruption and outright theft is hardly a governance success story.

Research drawing on comparative historical evidence on democracy, growth and corruption tends not to factor in changes over recent decades in the global financial infrastructure that enable a massive transfer of corrupt (and non-corrupt) resources offshore, or the [transnational systems of professional enablers](#) that facilitate this. Yes - countries like the United States became wealthy despite flawed, at best, democracy, but back in those days elites invested collusive profits and what they stole back into their own economy. Collusion between the public and private sectors in the early twentieth century contributed to organised crime becoming entrenched - a political problem as well as a security one, but not at the scale we see today where we can talk about the threat of [global kleptocracy](#) and '[organised corruption](#)'. When criminal organisations, politicians and businesspeople deliberately collude to create opportunities to steal money (and often to transfer a good chunk of it offshore), this is not the same as 'grand corruption'; it's about the deliberate criminalisation of politics. Every country has grand corruption scandals, some more often than others, but not every country has organised criminal corruption. The latter poses a substantial and specific threat to national/global security and to democracy. This is why we need to exercise caution in taking lessons from the past, updating them sufficiently before applying them to the present.

Both China and Rwanda also show why researchers need to be clearer, conceptually speaking, when it comes to what is meant by 'development'. If development is defined not just by growth but in terms of broader social and political outcomes - such as social justice, inclusion, protection of rights and of voice - then the arguments about 'good' versus 'bad' types of corruption fall flat. In discussing a recent book by [Michael Johnston and Scott A Fritzen](#), the [CIPE podcast hosts](#) pull out this quote: 'It is essential that we pursue the one goal that makes corruption control a compelling concern in the first place: justice... The fundamental issue we have argued is not transparency, political will, ratios of cost to benefits, constitutional architecture or even the letter of the law. Instead, it is the basic imbalances of power that enable the few to exploit the many.'

In 1964, Robert F Kennedy wrote, 'The problem of power is how to achieve its responsible use rather than its irresponsible and indulgent use - of how to get men of power to live for the public rather than off the public', something I've written about as [an inspiration for my own research](#). [Barry Hindess](#) wrote about the pitfalls of 'indirect approaches' to anti-corruption that avoid tackling corruption head on, arguing that indirect approaches risk the targeting of areas that are 'politically unproblematic', shifting 'the focus away from the issue of dealing with bad individuals and/or bad practices to the very different issue of societal reform - in this case of changing the social context in which such individuals and/or practices are able to flourish'. You can't get the men (or women) of power to live for the people if vested interests are left unchallenged and angry citizens are left feeling as if there's one rule for the powerful and one rule for everyone else.

[Vincenzo Ruggiero and Philip Gounev's](#) work on 'corruption and the disappearance of the victim' balances arguments about how corruption can 'stimulate growth by allowing entrepreneurs to circumvent barriers to economic initiative' with those that focus on how corruption diminishes democracy by 'exacerbat[ing] the moral and political de-skilling of the electorate' as well as increasing inequality and poverty. Corruption research and policy interventions rarely focus on victims in this way, nor on the downstream

violence that may occur in the chains of activities that corruption facilitates. If development is about more than growth, then tackling 'politically problematic' corruption is essential.

The translation of research into policy and practice is fraught with difficulty if we don't find better ways to take on board the complexity inherent in [tackling wicked problems](#). Taken at face value, it isn't always clear what the ultimate recommendations are leading on from some of this research: that democracies should un-democratise in order to fight corruption? That democracies really can't afford to fight corruption and should wait until their economies grow?

This does mean, of course, also not overclaiming about democracy either, nor underplaying any challenges. As [Susan Dodsworth and Graeme Ramshaw](#) say, none of this means that 'authoritarian regimes cannot promote development, nor that democratic regimes are guaranteed to deliver it'. Dodsworth and Ramshaw point out that 'the purported trade-off between democracy and development' may indeed be a false one, but we also need to be careful not to underplay the challenges facing democracies and the ways in which democracy promotion activities may also ignore complexities and overplay the value of apolitical technical approaches. We should also avoid instrumentalising democracy for anti-corruption purposes which can backfire if seen to be unsuccessful, undermining democracy as a result. Bringing anti-corruption and democracy together means being more honest about these challenges and what's possible too.

What this adds up to is not that only authoritarian countries can bring about economic growth or that democracy is a 'luxury' that poor countries can't afford, but rather that "all good things" may not always go together in mutually reinforcing ways - and 'there will always be tensions, dilemmas, and potential trade-offs between different processes of transformation', as [Alina Rocha Menocal and others](#) put it. It's the tensions and trade-offs between the ideal world of best practice governance toolkits and the messy, conflicting world we live in that those of us working in this space seem to struggle with the most.

Ok, but doesn't the evidence at least tell us that anti-corruption approaches aren't working and we need to 'do anti-corruption differently'?

This is an exciting time to work on anti-corruption with a lot of innovation happening in research and in practice. One of the most promising areas comes out of a growing body of evidence bringing together anti-corruption with DDD/TWP suggests that [moving away from 'solution-led' approaches in anti-corruption to 'problem-driven' ones](#) is likely to lead to more effective, ideally more politically feasible strategies and, thus, better outcomes. Both development and anti-corruption interventions typically start with solutions: we know where we want to end up and we have a menu of tactics or approaches to get there. The right starting point is rarely an anti-corruption solution, some sort of toolkit that can be rolled out in all sorts of contexts; instead, the starting point should be the specific problem that corruption is affecting. [Global Integrity](#), for example, explain that, 'Top-down technical and regulatory approaches to tackling corruption implemented over recent decades have a very poor record of success. In response...[our research] is operationally relevant, problem-driven, rigorous, and actionable'. The [World Bank](#) recently argued for a more 'problem-driven and outcome-oriented' approach that 'requires careful analysis of the specific mechanics of corruption, and often the development of sector or ministry-specific approaches to reducing the problem'.

There has been a lot of cross-fertilisation of ideas over recent years between the anti-corruption and TWP/DDD communities, which can be seen in particular in the design of the FCDO-funded [Anti-Corruption Evidence \(ACE\)](#) research programme. There was a [TWP Corruption and Anti-corruption workshop](#) organised as a side event to the London anti-corruption global summit in 2016, for example, and a series of workshops on [Rethinking Anti-corruption](#) led by Global Integrity ACE which led to a new series of [practical, politically informed frameworks](#) aimed at shifting strategy and practice. There is a growing body of evidence on [anti-corruption interventions that are designed](#)

[around DDD/TWP principles](#), such as [SOAS ACE's strategies](#) for politically feasible solutions to corruption, the [Strengthening Action Against Corruption](#) programme in Ghana, the [Targeting Natural Resource Corruption](#) programme and many others. If the reason why anti-corruption interventions have not been effective in reducing corruption is that we've been doing the wrong things in the wrong way, then this is all very promising.

In a new strategic framework called the [Corruption Functionality Framework](#), Caryn Peiffer and I give an example for what a problem-driven anti-corruption approach looks like and why it matters:

Imagine you've been asked to develop a plan to reduce border and customs bribery. This is an example of a typical starting point for an anti-corruption intervention, and this is also why so many fail to deliver results. Why - specifically - is this a problem? Are bribes decreasing trade levels and making it difficult to attract investment? Are bribes hurting vulnerable groups, such as women selling vegetables in informal markets? Are bribes facilitating the illicit flow of arms and drugs, leading to increased violence and instability? Is it a combination? While the problem - customs bribery - is the same, the motivations are very different. This is important because designing an effective intervention for each of these requires different actors in the room and different resource levels - even if some of the actual activities could end up being quite similar. They're also likely to face different technical and political challenges: tackling the illicit drugs trade is significantly more difficult than the others, even if widespread customs bribery is a problem identified in all scenarios.

Matt Andrews and colleagues in the [Building State Capability](#) team at Harvard talk about 'problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA)' when it comes to governance reforms. With PDIA, reformers start with much clearer problem identification rather than starting with a 'proven' best practice solution and locking this in whether it works or not. [They argue that](#), 'Efforts...should begin by asking "what is the problem?" instead of "which solution should we adopt?"... [This] provides a window onto the challenge...forcing agents to assess the ambiguities and weaknesses of incumbent structures, to identify areas where these need to be broken down and de-institutionalized, and to look for better ways of doing things'.

Starting with the actual problem that needs to be tackled means moving away from often simplistic solutions that aim to tackle complex, systemic problems which may or may not be the result of corruption or where [corruption may not be the biggest problem](#) reformers face. These problems are rarely going to be easy to fix, but we stand a better chance of doing so if we know what the real problems are in the first place.

Having said this, avoiding solutions-led approaches that impose 'best practice' models doesn't mean always starting with a blank slate or throwing away important lessons for good practice. [Greater granularity and specificity](#) may give the impression that '[context is everything](#)', but that doesn't mean there aren't useful tools to be found in toolkits or that lessons from one context can't be adapted for another. We need to [avoid throwing the baby away with the bathwater in the name of being problem-driven](#).

Problem-driven approaches also aren't necessarily *good* approaches either. They need to be properly tested like any type of reform intervention, of course, but even more importantly – problem definition is not a 'politics-free' zone. External actors and elites may choose problems to tackle that don't align with what citizens need or want. This could lead to issues like tackling the 'low-hanging fruit' rather than more difficult but also more transformational

challenges. It may mean focusing on problems that leave the politically powerful unchallenged. It could even mean entrenching corrupt elites while believing we're doing things differently.

Problem-driven approaches can also force us to confront directly how corruption is itself often about problem-solving, something that may be difficult for some reformers to take on board. [Ebenezer Obadare](#) calls this the 'necessity of everyday corruption', the idea that people use corruption to fix problems they face in their day-to-day lives. Caryn Peiffer and I talk about '[corruption functionality](#)', or 'the ways in which corruption provides solutions to the everyday problems people face, particularly in resource-scarce environments, problems that often have deep social, structural, economic and political roots'. As we say,

We're not suggesting that [corrupt practices] are good solutions; what evidence shows, however, is that these are solutions to problems that tackling corruption alone is unlikely to fix...Put simply: tackling corruption is hard, and successful, sustainable anti-corruption interventions are unlikely to be those that promise simple solutions to often complex, deeply-entrenched social, economic and political problems. But where corruption fills functions that have to be filled, '[doing nothing might be less harmful than effectively tackling corruption, if such attempts do not also address the underlying functions that corruption fulfils](#)'.

Being problem-driven means taking seriously the fact that tackling corruption means finding ways to help people solve problems without corruption, and this means tackling underlying issues like poverty, inequality and insecurity. This is why sustainability is such a problem with anti-corruption interventions, and also why [successful anti-corruption interventions can and do cause harm](#). It's why fighting corruption is so hard to do.

What makes it even harder are the ways in which the world has changed since the rise of the global anti-corruption agenda in the early 1990s. Put simply: there has never been a time where it has been as easy to be corrupt. From the financial systems and professional enablers that hide corrupt funds from scrutiny, to increasingly transnational supply chains that open up corrupt opportunities to many more people, to new [cryptocurrencies](#) that put corrupt (and criminal) receipts on your smartphone, and much more, we have made corruption exponentially easier at the same time we've elevated the fight against it. Either we're not very clever, or maybe anti-corruption hasn't really been a top priority after all.

We also, frankly, don't know if anti-corruption interventions succeed or fail because we don't have accurate measures to work with. It's almost impossible to measure levels of corruption, which means that claims of success or failure have to be taken with a pinch of salt. My research with Caryn Peiffer and others on 'positive outliers' in bribery shows why this is important. The [new methodology](#) developed enables the identification of sector-level cases where bribery has reduced against the odds: in other words, it's a way to measure comparative changes in bribery levels. While findings from the research suggest anti-corruption '[successes](#)' [that are far from unproblematic](#), what they also suggest is that the very types of approaches that many researchers and practitioners say have failed were in fact responsible for the successful reductions in bribery measured. The research confirms, firstly, why we need to get much more specific about [types, contexts and actors](#) when it comes to corruption, moving well beyond simple binaries or 2x2 typologies; and secondly, that until we have better ways to measure (specific types of) corruption, we're basically just speculating about what works *and* what doesn't.

Perhaps the real problem is that we assume anti-corruption measures aren't effective simply

because we look around us and observe that there's still a lot of corruption despite there also being a lot of anti-corruption efforts. But it's not like there's a nice, self-contained bathtub full of corruption that we stir anti-corruption measures into like bubble bath. It's more like corruption is an ocean, and there are melting ice caps out there adding more water in all the time - often thanks to things like the systems that enable illicit financial flows and changes in technology. Everywhere you look there are sharks - powerful elites in rich and poor countries alike - who benefit from the system and work hard to keep it going, often leaving a trail of victims in their wake. So we could potentially be more effective than we realise, if only we had better ways to measure this, but one way or another, we need to stop trying to imagine that we're standing over a bathtub holding our anti-corruption bubble bath when we're not.

The most honest answer is that we simply don't know enough about what works and what doesn't when it comes to anti-corruption to say with any certainty that the *problem* lies with anti-corruption approaches. While the evidence is clear that '[politically blind](#)' governance interventions that fail to take context into account are problematic, what specifically needs to change is not yet clear. Those of us working in the anti-corruption research space need to more cautious about claiming what we do or don't know, giving policy makers and practitioners the impression that we have certainty where what we really have are hypotheses. And policy makers, practitioners and, especially, politicians need to get better at assessing evidence, managing complexity in their work and not pushing for quick and easy (and often untested) solutions from research in the quest to 'do something' to fight corruption. If we look at the tangled ball of yarn on democracy, corruption and development and conclude that we can't work on these things together, then as a field we have to ask ourselves some pretty big questions about how we're so certain about this and what it is we really care about.

Can we 'do anti-corruption democratically'?

This note has focused on why current evidence shouldn't stop us from thinking about how to 'do anti-corruption democratically', not just 'differently'. Not everyone working on anti-corruption will care about democracy, but for those of us who think about *anti-corruption as a means rather than an end* - who care about democracy, open societies, [human rights](#) and social justice in particular - this means getting serious about 'doing anti-corruption democratically'. Corruption [undermines trust](#) in politics and in each other. It fuels [protest, populism and anger](#). It keeps kleptocrats in power and [undermines national security](#). It undermines our [efforts to tackle COVID-19](#) and will undermine our attempts to 'build back better'. Democracies *need* to tackle corruption, but they also need us to get better at it.

What the insight on problem-driven approaches to anti-corruption does is force us to take on board some often uncomfortable challenges: who decides what the real problems are, and - even more challenging - what should be done when corruption itself is about problem-solving? If politics is, at its heart, about the exercise of power, then thinking and working politically about anti-corruption means taking the power imbalances in anti-corruption itself seriously, not in the least to avoid causing harm in the quest to do good. We need to be careful about thinking that some types of corruption are less bad than others without being much clearer on context-specificity. While being overly moralistic about corruption may not have got us very far over the years, being too 'realpolitik' about it is potentially dangerous too.

And there is emerging evidence that suggests [the fight against corruption itself can harm democracy](#). This includes things like [anti-corruption messaging campaigns](#) that leave people more likely to pay a bribe and less likely to feel they're able to do anything themselves to fight back. Or how [the reporting of corruption by investigative journalists and civil society can fuel populism](#) and backlashes against democracy. Or where the [politicisation of corruption in election campaigns](#) can [weaken democracy](#) and may

even lead to [rising authoritarianism](#) or [violence](#). All of these are serious charges that need to be taken seriously; however it's also important to remember that the real problem is not the anti-corruption interventions but rather the *corruption* and the impunity of the powerful, perceived or otherwise. The solution needs to be [tackling impunity](#), but this definitely doesn't mean we should continue doing the same anti-corruption things in the same ways as we do now.

Going forward I suggest we should focus our attention on developing a better understanding of what to do differently in three areas in particular:

tackling the global systems that enable corruption and weaken democracy, including illicit finance, tax havens and professional enablers as well as the leaders who use these systems to ['whitewash' their reputations](#) and prevent reform;

strengthening the democratic oversight systems needed to tackle corruption at the national level, so that democracies can better ['combat corruption capably'](#) and that impunity, perceived or otherwise, can be addressed; and

having more honest conversations about the ways in which fighting corruption may not work and may even weaken democracy, which includes being prepared to better test ways in which we can do things differently to how we do things now. This will require much more humility than we currently see in many political and policy narratives about both democracy and anti-corruption.

With all of these we'll need to learn more about when to fight corruption directly and when to do so ['under the radar'](#), where we're currently learning more about *how* but not necessarily much about *when*. Just having these conversations, though, is a step forward in doing anti-corruption better, not just differently, and in ['doing development democratically'](#) for sustainably open societies and for social justice.

Annex 1: Bibliography

Adebanwi, Wale & Obadare, Ebenezer (2011) When corruption fights back: democracy and elite interest in Nigeria's anti-corruption war. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 49(2): 185-213.

Ang, Yuen Yuen (2020) *China's gilded age: the paradox of economic boom and vast corruption*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Charron, Nicholas & Lapuente, Victor (2010) Does democracy produce quality of government? *European Journal of Political Research*, 49(4): 443-470. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01906.x>

Chayes, Sarah (2020) *On corruption in America and what is at stake*. New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Cheeseman, Nic & Peiffer, Caryn (2020) Why efforts to fight corruption hurt democracy: lessons from a survey experiment in Nigeria. SOAS Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) Working Paper 027, October. <https://ace.soas.ac.uk/publication/why-efforts-to-fight-corruption-hurt-democracy-nigeria/>

Dasandi, Niheer, Laws, Ed, Marquette, Heather & Robinson, Mark (2019) What does the evidence tell us about 'Thinking and Working Politically' in development assistance? *Politics and Governance*, 7(2): 155-168. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i2.1904>

Dodsworth, Susan & Cheeseman, Nic (2020) Political trust: the glue that keeps democracies together. Westminster Foundation for Democracy/University of Birmingham, May. https://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/WFD_May2020_Dodsworth_Cheeseman_PoliticalTrust.pdf

Dodsworth, Susan & Ramshaw, Graeme (2021) Democracy's development dividend. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(1): 126-38.

Engler, Sarah (2020) 'Fighting corruption' or 'fighting the corrupt elite'? Politicizing corruption within and beyond the populist divide. *Democratization*, 27(4): 643-661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1713106>

Green, Penny & Ward, Tony (2004) *State crime: governments, violence and corruption*. London: Pluto Press.

Herbert, Siân & Marquette, Heather (2021) *COVID-19, governance and conflict: emerging impacts and future evidence needs*. K4D Emerging Issues Report. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. 10.19088/K4D.2021.029

Heywood, Paul (2018) Combating corruption in the twenty-first century: new approaches. *Daedalus*, 147(3): 83-97. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_00504

Jackson, David (2020) How change happens in anti-corruption: a map of policy perspectives. U4 Issue 2020:14. <https://www.u4.no/publications/how-anti-corruption-change-happens>

Johnston, Michael & Fritzen, Scott A (2021) *The conundrum of corruption: reform for social justice*. London: Routledge.

Marquette, Heather (2020) How can I integrate Thinking and Working Politically into my day-to-day programming on natural resource management? *TNRC Blog*, April. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/tnrc-blog-how-can-i-integrate-thinking-and-working-politically-into-my-day-to-day-programming-on-natural-resource-governance>

Marquette, Heather & Peiffer, Caryn (2020) *Corruption functionality framework*. Washington DC: Global Integrity Anti-Corruption Evidence. <https://ace.globalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GI-ACE-Research-Paper-Corruption-Framework.pdf>

Marquette, Heather & Peiffer, Caryn (2018) Grappling with the 'real politics' of systemic corruption: Theoretical debates versus 'real-world' functions. *Governance*, 31(3): 499-514. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12311>

Marquette, Heather & Peiffer, Caryn (2019) Thinking politically about corruption as problem-solving: a reply to Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell. *Governance*, 32(4): 811-820. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12444>

Moran, Jon (2001) Democratic transitions and forms of corruption. *Crime, Law & Social Change*, 36: 379-393.

Pei, Minxin (2016) *China's crony capitalism: the dynamics of regime decay*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pyman, Mark & Heywood, Paul (2020) *The sector focus & reformulation approach (SFRA): enabling leaders and managers to formulate practical strategies for corruption reduction*. Washington DC: Global Integrity Anti-Corruption Evidence. <https://ace.globalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GI-ACE-Research-Paper-SFRA.pdf>

Ramshaw, Graeme (2020) Doing development democratically: the foundation of open societies and open economies. Westminster Foundation for Development, 15 September. <https://www.wfd.org/2020/09/15/doing-development-democratically-the-foundation-of-open-societies-and-open-economies/>

Annex 2: About the author

Heather Marquette is Professor of Development Politics at the University of Birmingham and is currently seconded part-time to FCDO's Research and Evidence Division as Senior Research Fellow (Governance and Conflict).

She is a member of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's expert network and is on the advisory group for Transparency International Defence and Security programme, as well as a steering committee member of the global Thinking & Working Politically Community of Practice.

Heather's research, which has been funded by the British Academy/Global Challenges Research Fund, DFID, DFAT and the EU, focuses on corruption and anti-corruption interventions, development politics, aid and foreign policy and, increasingly, transnational organised crime. She writes here in her capacity as a Professor at the University of Birmingham.



Scan here to sign up to WFD news

Westminster Foundation for Democracy
22 Whitehall, London SW1A 2EG, United Kingdom
🐦 @WFD_Democracy | 📘 @WestminsterFoundation
www.wfd.org

