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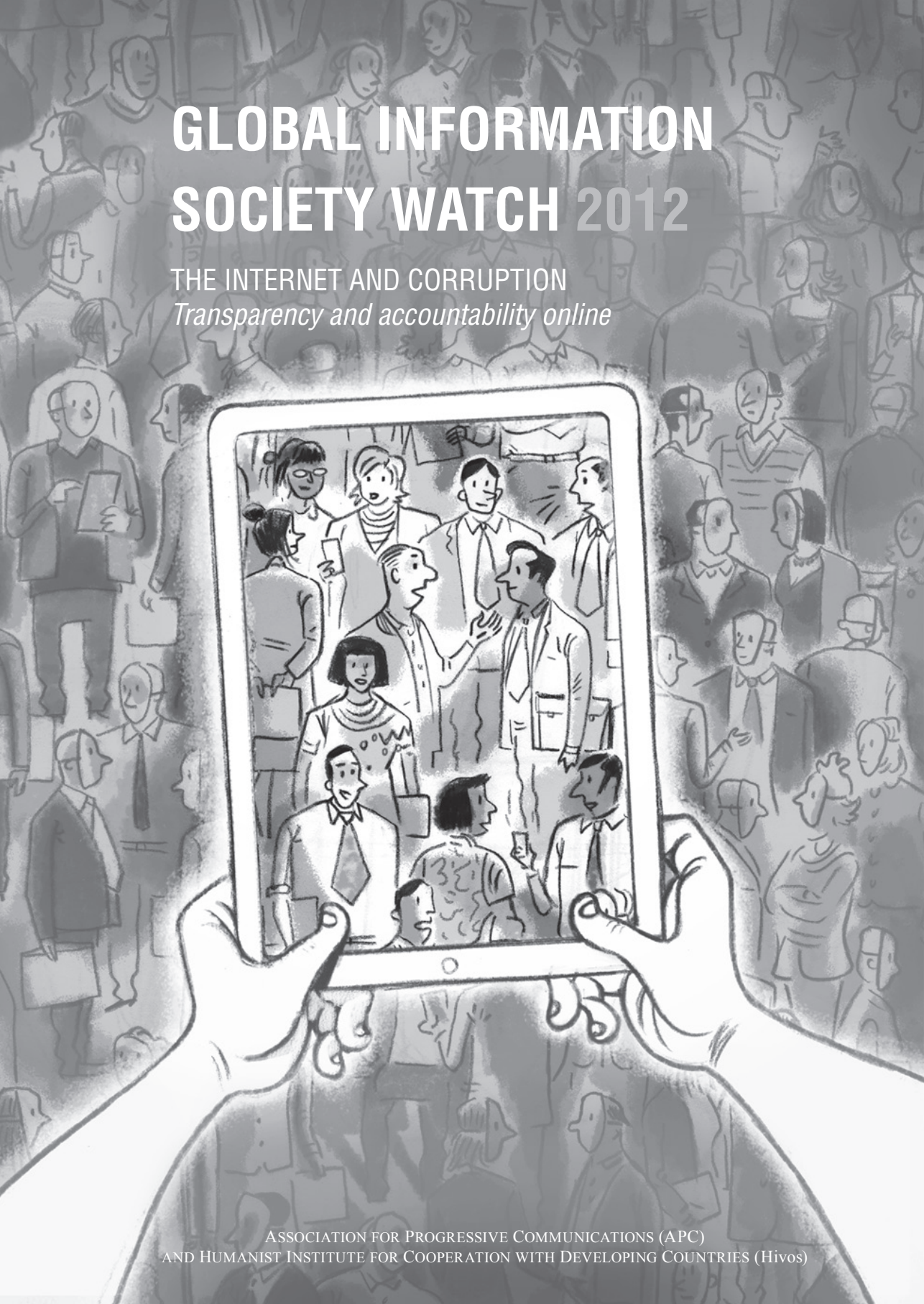
THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION

Transparency and accountability online



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Governments using ICTs for integrity and accountability: Some thoughts on an emergent research and advocacy agenda

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False dawn, window dressing or taking integrity to the next level?

Introduction

> *The experience of developed and developing countries indicates that electronic reforms in the fight against corruption are the most effective methods in the implementation of the fight against corruption.*
> (Centre for Economic and Social Development Azerbaijan: CESD Anti-Corruption Strategy for the Republic of Azerbaijan, April 2011)
>
> *E-government is seen more than ever as at the core of public sector reforms.*
> (OECD Government at a Glance 2011)

Imagine you are an NGO lobbying your government to clean up one of the most notorious areas for corruption: public procurement. In response, the government declares that a centrepiece of its anti-corruption strategy will be an electronic procurement system that will make corrupt interference all but impossible. What do you do? Do you applaud this move?

Imagine you are a policy maker intent on curbing corruption in the judiciary and you know that case backlogs offer a serious entry point for corruption. Now some IT consultants strongly suggest installing an electronic case management system to tackle this issue head on. Do you purchase and deploy it?

Imagine you are a public administration expert and the tax authorities in your country turn to you for advice on whether they should follow the example of their peers in a neighbouring country and introduce electronic filing of taxes to root out corruption in tax collection. What will you suggest to them?

Corruption – everywhere and hard to weed out

Corruption, defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, is commonly recognised and amply documented to be one of the most fundamental and most vexing societal problems around. Evidence from all over the world shows that corruption – from bribery and cronyism to undue influence and policy capture – deprives particularly the poorest of the very goods and services that are fundamental to their livelihoods, such as access to water, health, food or educational opportunities. Corruption fuels ethnic tensions and corrosive public distrust of the central institutions of collective governance. Corruption has been documented to stunt development, stymie our collective response to climate change and blunt our ability to construct fair societies. It is closely linked to impunity, inequality and insecurity.[2]

The pervasiveness of corruption also makes it very difficult to plot viable paths for reform and change. Rooting out corruption in institutions where it is deeply entrenched presents a daunting and often seemingly insurmountable challenge for government reformers for at least three reasons. First, collective action problems abound. When all your colleagues pay off the boss to gain a promotion or the teacher to enhance their kids' test results, you are pressured to join in so that you are not left behind. Second, sustainable integrity will not only require carrots and sticks, but also a change in values and norms. But changing organisational or communal cultures, however, is

1 Dieter Zinnbauer works on emerging policy issues for Transparency International. This article presents the personal opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of Transparency International. This is a work in progress. Please do not quote or cite without the permission of the author. Comments are always most welcome to: dzinnbauer@transparency.org

2 For examples and a compilation of empirical evidence on these and many other instances of corruption, see, for example, the Global Corruption Report series published by Transparency International, which invites academic experts and practitioners to explore corruption issues in a specific sector every year, e.g. construction and post-conflict reconstruction (2005), health (2006), judiciary (2007), water (2008), business (2009), climate change (2010/11) or education (forthcoming 2013). For general overviews see, for example, Bardhan, P. (1997) Corruption and Development: A Review of Issues, *Journal of Economic Literature*, 35(3), or Svensson, J. (2005) Eight Questions about Corruption, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 19.

a long-term, laborious project with uncertain outcomes. Third, corrupt systems are often built on interlocking interests and deep networks of patronage and cronyism across administrative and political hierarchies. As a result, well-meaning reformers might find themselves outflanked by higher tiers of the bureaucracy or political principals that stand to benefit from the corrupt system on the ground. This makes corrupt networks extremely resourceful and effective in thwarting attempts to shut them down.

Technologies to the rescue? The potential of ICTs to fight corruption

Facing such an uphill struggle, it is not surprising that government reformers and anti-corruption fighters pin their hopes on technology as a potentially transformational tool to help cut the Gordian knot of corruption, shake up these entrenched systems of corrupt incentives and interests, and offer real prospects for more integrity and accountability. New ICTs might be – and are indeed often promoted as being – one of the answers. Just looking at their potential functionalities, they can be plausibly expected to address a long list of institutional deficiencies that are believed to foster corruption.

Some of the main expected benefits from ICTs, as expressed in the research and policy literature, include the anticipation that they will:

- Reduce information asymmetries between principal (office holder) and client (citizen) so that the latter finds it easier to assert his or her rights without corruption interfering.
- Limit the discretion of office holders to diverge from applicable rules in the exercise of their duties.
- Automate specific processes and/or reduce direct, frequent, personal interaction between a specific office holder and an individual citizen, a proximity that can foster collusion and corruption.
- Cut out gatekeepers and intermediaries that often act as go-betweens to facilitate bribe payments or demand their own illicit cut to make a business deal happen in the first place.
- Reduce red tape in public bureaucracies and through this remove potential entry points for extortion and corrupt rent-seeking.
- Make transactions with public officials and the performance of the latter more transparent, documentable and auditable, deterring corrupt behaviour.
- Provide a growing repertoire of collective action tools and platforms for citizens to organise, report and mobilise against corruption.

These and many other expected features are well referenced in a large number of policy reports, prospective essays and conceptual discussions. In a nutshell, hopes that technology can make a very important contribution to the fight against corruption are extremely high.[3]

High stakes, yet little empirical evidence to guide implementation and constructive advocacy

Given the high hopes attached to ICTs, governments around the world – from local to national to regional level – are rolling out high-profile ICT modernisation projects, often tied to bold claims about how these initiatives are meant to boost accountability and integrity. The 15 core EU countries are estimated to have spent as much as 35 billion euro on ICTs in 2004 alone, including 11.5 billion on e-government activities.[4] And by 2010, the total annual ICT spending by governments around the world was estimated to have reached a whopping USD 423 billion.[5]

The transformative impact of these investments is already evident. By 2010 on average more than 80% of businesses and 40% of citizens in OECD countries were already interacting with public authorities online.[6]

This flurry of activity is by no means confined to industrialised countries. As of 2004, for example, more than 90 developing countries were busy developing national ICT strategies.[7] Almost three quarters of all World Bank projects between 2003 and 2010 included ICT components, and these technology elements were considered particularly important for achieving the intended objectives in public sector governance reform projects.[8]

3 For a summary of expected benefits see, for example, Gronlund, A. et al. (2010) *Increasing transparency and fighting corruption through ICT: Empowering people and communities*, SPIDER ICT4D Series No. 3; for a forward-looking analysis for policy makers, see Frissen, V. et al. (2007) *The future of eGovernment: An exploration of ICT-driven models of eGovernment for the EU in 2020*, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, European Commission.

4 Codagnone, C. (2006) Expenditure Study, eGovernment Economics Project, eGovernment Unit, DG Information Society and Media, European Commission.

5 Task Force on Financial Mechanisms (2004) *Report of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms for ICT for Development*.

6 OECD (2011) *Government at a Glance*, OECD, Paris.

7 Task Force on Financial Mechanisms (2004) op. cit.

8 World Bank Independent Evaluation Group (2011) *Capturing Technology for Development: An Evaluation of World Bank Group Activities in Information and Communication Technologies*, World Bank, Washington D.C.

As this overview shows, the stakes are extremely high. The technology projects that are being undertaken in the name of integrity are of immense ambition and scale. Governments are often the single largest consumers and users of ICTs in a country and some of the most ambitious ICT adopters are found in high-corruption contexts: almost half of the 25 countries around the world whose governments are believed to prioritise ICTs the most are perceived to face rather high levels of corruption in the public sector.[9]

So, given these high hopes and ambitions, the questions of how successful the many projects undertaken in the name of enhancing accountability and integrity are, and how they can be most effective in their role in the fight against corruption, are absolutely essential. A first quick scan of the evidence yields very uneven and mixed results. It casts some serious doubts on all-too-inflated claims about a near automatic benign impact of these technological fixes on corruption. And at minimum it strongly suggests that more research and more monitoring and constructive, competent engagement by civil society are crucial to ensure that the integrity and accountability potential of these technologies is fully exploited and related initiatives are not just used as window dressing by reform-resistant governments.[10]

Uneven attention, uneven learning and advocacy

Right now, however, there are reasons to doubt that this research will come forth, and the related watchdog functions be fullfilled. Civil society engagement and an evidence-centred policy discourse on crucial technology uses by governments that are carried out for purposes of integrity and accountability are rather limited.[11] Instead it appears that much of the public attention and policy analysis in the area of ICTs for governance have so far focused on the citizen side: how ICTs can empower citizens to hold officials to account and mobilise against corrupt rulers, and how governments can facilitate this by creating enabling conditions, from promoting ICT access and skills to adopting open government standards or devising participatory online processes. These issues are already being abundantly explored, from public discourse to specialised research debates, and a very active research and policy advocacy community has formed around them.

The other, important side of the coin, however – the use of ICTs for integrity purposes by governments and administrations themselves – has received comparatively limited attention in the broader policy community and research community. What are the insights and lessons that could be learnt from the first batch of e-governance applications in this regard, to make them more effective in the future, to help other governments avoid dead ends, and to help interested civil society groups to critically and constructively accompany related government efforts?

Why hopes are high but under-examined

On the surface, this uneven attention is surprising. To put it provocatively, it looks like all attention has shifted to government 2.0, the empowerment and networked oversight of citizens through ICTs, and rather short shrift is given to government 1.0, or the use of ICTs by governments for their core tasks and services.

On closer inspection, the reasons for this attention shift are becoming clearer. A peculiar confluence of interests to create big hopes (industry) and to buy into them (governments), compounded by the inability or lack of interest on the part of civil society NGOs to competently monitor and comment, prepare the ground for this. The ICT industry is keen on selling high-margin, big-ticket technology projects to the public sector, a customer that is perhaps often not as difficult and discerning as private industry clients. In addition, governments are eager to showcase progressiveness and innovation leadership or want to be seen to be active in fighting corruption, and find ICT solutions an appealing tool to project this image. At the same time, civil society organisations working on corruption issues are eager to promote practical solutions, and they are open to trying out new high-potential weapons against corruption. But many of them may not have the resources and expertise to evaluate bold technology claims and complex implementations in great detail – while technology activists are inclined

9 High corruption in the sense that they do not rank among the 40 countries around the world that are perceived to face the lowest levels of public sector corruption. Source: Author's calculation based on the World Economic Forum Executive Opinion Survey, 2010 and 2011 editions, and Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2011.

10 For an elaboration of these claims and an overview of the evidence in the four areas of e-procurement, electronic judicial case management, e-taxation and electronic ID cards, see the more extensive background paper by Zinnbauer, D. (2012) forthcoming on SSRN.

11 There are obviously some exceptions to this general observation. For example, TI groups in Slovakia and Hungary are utilising procurement data for their corruption analysis. TI Georgia has commented on the usability of the e-tender system in the country. TI India has developed an electronic procurement integrity matrix, while TI groups in the US and Mexico have undertaken research and advocacy work on electronic procurement. Regarding the latter, see, for example, TI USA (2011) *A work in progress: Implementation of the APEC government procurement transparency standards in Mexico, Peru, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines*; and Transparencia Mexicana (2012) *A new role for citizens in public procurement.*

to focus on freedom of expression or privacy implications of government technology use, and do not view the impact on integrity as a big priority to examine and monitor.

Finally, scholars, no matter if they belong to the camp of technology optimists or sceptics, tend to focus their energy on the more popular and exciting social media/citizen empowerment side of ICTs or, if they examine government use of technology, they tend to focus on the efficiency dimension. The result is a research, advocacy and policy debate that pays only limited attention to tracking, probing and helping to improve the many technology projects that governments have embarked upon in the name of tackling corruption and boosting integrity.

This is unfortunate, particularly because anecdotal evidence and what we know about how technologies are being shaped and implemented provide some reason to be sceptical about overly exuberant predictions of how potential functionalities actually translate into impact.

It has long been received wisdom on the industry side, for example, that as many as two out of three large-scale ICT projects fail to achieve all of their intended results. Even if this number may appear a bit exaggerated, it still points at a relatively high failure rate. For governance-related projects such a rate is confirmed, for example, by a World Bank evaluation report for the Bank's 2003-2010 ICT project portfolio that finds that only "about half of ICT components in projects supporting public sector governance are likely to achieve their intended result."[12] Moreover, a vast body of in-depth research on how technologies in many fields are being adopted provides ample evidence that functionalities and impact are by no means predetermined by technological properties, but are being actively shaped, filtered, subverted and altered by contextual factors, unexpected circumstances or influential user groups that make them serve their own interests.

Yet lessons from meticulous studies of technology development and adoption also highlight the role that careful analysis, awareness raising, technology design, enabling policies and related advocacy can play in realising the desirable social potential and impacts of technologies.

Taken together, all these insights confirm the need and urgency to look more closely at how governments' use of integrity technologies works out in practice, and how an essential ecology for related research and advocacy can be nurtured.[13] ■

12 World Bank Independent Evaluation Group (2011) op. cit.

13 For some ideas on how to map the degree of research and civil society engagement, identify critical gaps and plot a way forward, see the related background paper by Zinnbauer, D. (2012) forthcoming on SSRN.