

The Necessity of Talking the Talk: The Functions of Communication for Anti-Corruption Political Will and Policy Development in Ukrainian Local Government

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Abstract

Corruption is a notoriously intractable problem. How do local public authorities manage to initiate and sustain meaningful anti-corruption efforts? To address this question, we examine the processes and interactions among key stakeholders in six local settings in Ukraine showing sustained reform effort between 2014 and 2021. The analysis identifies key communicative tasks that, taken together, induce initial commitments to tackle corruption, turn commitments into tangible policies, and sustain reform and processes of change. The cases suggest three recommendations for international and local policy actors seeking to support reform: invest in multi-stakeholder plat-forms, use facilitators, and build internal capacity for data collection and analysis among local governments.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

Introduction

Since independence in 1991, Ukraine has experienced widespread, systemic corruption at all levels of government. The Revolution of Dignity in 2014 became a turning point, setting in motion significant top-down reforms, including decentralisation and digital transformation, anti-corruption and judicial reforms. It also triggered numerous bottom-up civil society initiatives against corruption across the country, as well as efforts by local political authorities to address specifically local issues.

Effective anti-corruption reform initiatives require sustained effort by stakeholders and effective communication among them. Contextual conditions such as government institutions, regime type, diversified economic base and disruptive events may be conducive, but in and of themselves insufficient to stimulate political will. Supporting and facilitating effective communicative processes may be a key strategy for development cooperation interventions seeking to promote anti-corruption reform.

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Box 1 Definition of political will for anti-corruption

Political will denotes mutually trusted commitments to counteract corruption among key actors, coupled with a shared understanding of the problem and agreement on effective policy solutions.

Adapted from Post, Raile, and Raile (2010)

Mapping of the case cities



This policy brief first discusses corruption as a policy issue, then analyses communication among key actors in six Ukrainian cities to identify and explains communicative functions pinpointed as crucial for the emergence of political will. The concluding section highlights the relation to new patterns of interaction between local authorities and citizens that reflect a transition from the post-Soviet social contract towards more inclusive collaborative governance – changes that may also contribute to the resilience witnessed in the Russian war against Ukraine - and provides recommendations for policy actors promoting reform, including international donors supporting anti-corruption efforts in local government.

Methods

The results build on an in-depth study of six cities in Ukraine in which local authorities demonstrated sustained political will to counteract corruption between 2015 and 2020⁴: Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Poltava, Vinnytsia, Zhytomyr. The cities were selected as those performing above average in terms of political will for anti-corruption. Political will was measured through an original survey of 172 anti-corruption civil society organisations, and the cities’ performance on the Local Government Publicity Index and Transparent Cities Index. In the six cities, we interviewed 56 individuals, including one Mayor, Deputy Mayors, managers of the executive, council deputies, civil society and business representatives in May-July 2021. See more details on the research design and findings in the research report.⁵

Corruption as collective action dilemma: Problem and solution

Anti-corruption institutional reforms and effective implementation and enforcement of those reforms require the backing of a wide set of actors. In a political context where corruption is prevalent, commitment to anti-corruption efforts among a few individuals, even in key leadership positions, is likely to be insufficient. Widespread corruption benefits incumbents and others with insider status in the short term. Unlike other policy areas, change requires not only new rules or policy resources, but also that all actors involved change their behaviour in a way that infringes on their short-term material interests. If only a small

⁴ The study is a part of an ICLD-funded research project “Opening the black box of political will: Local public authorities and anti-corruption efforts in Ukraine”, which was conducted in 2020-22 by the University of Gothenburg, Kyiv School of Economics and Anti-Corruption Research and Education Centre at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.

⁵ <https://icld.se/en/publications/political-will-for-anti-corruption-reform-communicative-pathways-to-collective-action-in-ukraine/>



Lviv (tower of Dormition church and the dome of Dominican Church)
- one of the main cultural centres of Ukraine
Photo credit: Oksana Huss

portion of actors seek change, the overall outcome will be marginal, and those pursuing reform or who abstain from corruption may even suffer retaliatory actions from others.

Overcoming any collective action dilemma means that key actors commit to cooperate for collective benefits. An extensive simultaneous shift in behavioural strategies is necessary in order that all key actors are likely to continue to honour and work toward that collective commitment. Research shows that this shift will only occur when each stakeholder trusts in a genuine commitment of all other stakeholders (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013). To overcome systemic corruption, all actors involved must commit to foregoing the rents of corruption, which they are more likely to do if they trust that others will do the same. In a similar way, actors are more likely to commit time, resources and vest their reputation in anti-corruption reform efforts if they trust that others are willing to do the same. The *collective* commitment to the cause of non-corruption is, thus, at the centre of solving the corruption problem.

Communication to foster political will to reduce corruption

Communication facilitates the development of collective commitment to address intractable problems. In the six local governments with sustained positive change in anti-corruption political will, actors engaged in the same types of communicative functions, despite considerable variation in organisational approaches to structuring anti-corruption policy efforts.

Developing political will requires that actors communicate effectively to 1) induce initial commitments, 2) translate commitments into tangible solutions and policies, and 3) persuade relevant stakeholders, especially veto-players, of the necessity of policy changes over time (see Figure 1). These functions of communication shape stakeholder preferences, develop mutual trust, and are essential to developing viable policy solutions.

Importantly, these communicative functions do not represent a linear process: one need not start by making payoffs visible and gradually move towards vetting the operative solutions through persuasion. In the cases studied, the development of operative solutions was often the entry point for communication: actors came to realise and articulate the payoffs while exchanging arguments for and against operative solutions. The recommendations below outline measures to facilitate these

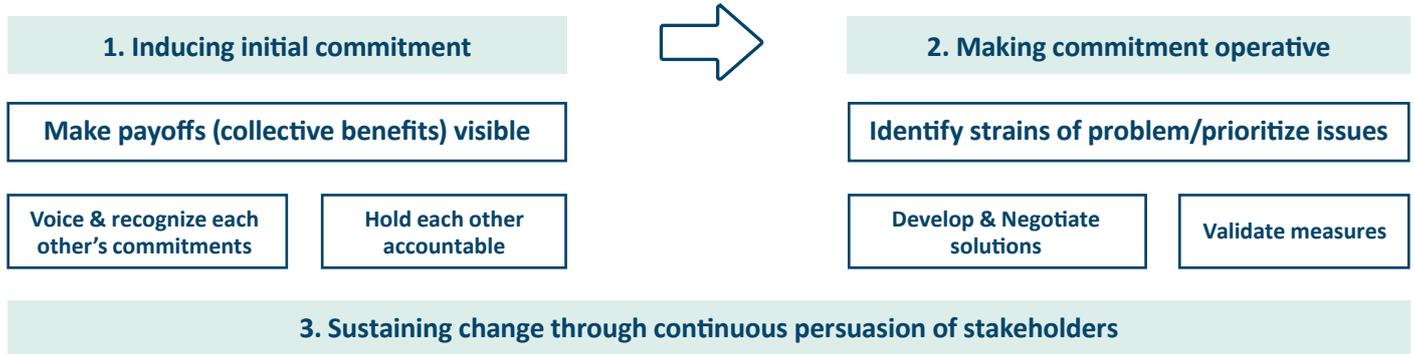


Figure 1 Functions of communication for political will to reduce corruption in local authorities

communicative functions. The first two overarching functions need further unpacking as they each include more specific interactive tasks.

How communication induces initial commitments to anti-corruption reform efforts

Making the benefits of reform evident to stakeholders.

In the studied cities, eradicating corruption per se was not the primary goal of stakeholder collaboration. Combatting corruption implies for many the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators. Instead, in the discussions and interactions, communication focused on achieving local collective benefits and improvements, and poor quality of government was framed as an obstacle to that end. Positively articulating the payoffs – local economic development or the city’s public reputation in the country, to mention two examples – starts the conversation from the trust that all want these positive outcomes, and avoids blaming and accusations of past behaviour, which facilitates bringing both politically and economically powerful stakeholders on board.

Voicing and recognising each other’s commitments.

When stakeholders publicly proclaim their commitment to reform, it sets up accountability relations and creates an accountability forum, which is any set of actors knowledgeable of other actors’ commitments. Commitments made only in closed settings among small sets of actors thus carry a much smaller potential for transformative change. Wide recognition of elite actors’ commitments increases leverage among other actors to demand action on those commitments.

Holding each other accountable.

The cases offer numerous examples of when actors remind authorities to stick to their own reform promises, as well as to formal procedures and decisions. Both politicians and civil society actors exercised this function and called upon each other to stay true to promises made.

**Box 2 Making payoffs visible
in multi-stakeholder platforms**

In Lviv, local authorities introduced a multi-stakeholder platform to shape the city’s economic strategy together with the IT and tourism sectors. Untransparent governance of tenders, for example, was one of the issues raised through this platform, instigating a review of the municipal property management process. In Vinnytsia, the platform brought together civil society and local authorities to co-create new principles of inclusive decision making. The platform in Vinnytsia was institutionalised in a way to increase the likelihood of sustainability.

Where did this communication transpire?

The organisational spaces for making initial commitments varied from institutionalised multi-stakeholder platforms hosting regular discussions over several years (see Box 2) to more ad hoc communication through media coverage, roundtables, private conversation, bilateral meetings between authorities and activists, and citizen appearances at city council and other public meetings. The organisational approach was less crucial than the functions themselves.

How communication helps make anti-corruption commitments tangible

Converting commitments into concrete policies and (technical) solutions is necessary to achieve and track progress.

Identifying strains of a problem and prioritising issues to tackle.

Through dialogue, actors take stock of the effects of corruption on local business and government operations and identify specific forms and corruption schemes commonly used in the locality in specific sectors (see Box 3). The goal was not to identify perpetrators but to map schemes and loopholes, and to redesign the processes to reduce corruption risks. Some of these communicative processes took the form of bilateral conversations between representatives of an initiating administrative unit who served as informants describing the “bottlenecks” of procurement processes or the “price” for issuing a construction permit. In a few cases, though not all, such interviews were a part of formal Corruption Risks Assessments (CRA) and included end users, such as businesses or civic monitoring organisations.

Developing operative solutions.

This function served to inject policy solutions with expert knowledge and, crucially, adapt the solutions to the operations and routines of stakeholders in the hope of increasing compliance. The forms of communication varied between working group discussions, bilateral conversations and municipality-donor dialogue, while public events or roundtables were not mentioned as arenas for such talks. In a few instances, local authorities developed operative solutions without involving other stakeholders.

Validating proposed measures.

Once a draft policy solution was available, local authorities routinely ran their proposed measures through “reality checks” with relevant audiences such as sector experts and potentially affected stakeholders.

Box 3 Identifying strains of a problem/prioritising issues

In a multi-stakeholder workshop, the Integrity Sector in Lviv, together with the NGO Lviv Regulatory Hub, started the co-creation of the anti-corruption strategy with a workshop to identify corruption problems. They invited local activists and businesspeople. A professional and neutral facilitator, a university professor, helped the participants organise their thoughts. The process relied on effective facilitation techniques and numerous sticky notes. The result: workshop participants identified key priority areas for the anti-corruption strategy.

Authorities sought feedback through informal bilateral consultations, public presentations and round tables, and advisory bodies consisting of experts and activists.

How communication helps make anti-corruption commitments tangible

As change almost always implies a cognitive burden for the actors involved, continual persuasion is essential. Persuasion is a discursive fostering of support among key decision-makers or implementers for a specific measure to move from rhetorical commitment to action. This function was crucial when a draft regulation on an initiative needed political backing or political endorsement failed to translate into actual implementation. Policy initiators delivered tailor-made arguments to stakeholders in both situations to keep them on board. The institutional settings for persuasion varied immensely – from bilateral informal conversations to convince veto players, to institutionalized bodies of consultation, up to communication via media and public events.

Concluding discussion

The communicative processes described here exemplify a significant shift towards the broader democratisation in Ukraine. First, compared to the top-down communication patterns between the authorities and society in post-Soviet Ukraine before the 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity, we observed that citizens feel entitled to demand that politicians keep their promises. Interviewees often reported contention and disputes in the conversations over anti-corruption policies, which is perhaps unavoidable in an issue as sensitive as corruption. Second, disputes over anti-corruption policies were solved not through exerting authority or coercion, but with reference to the “power of a better argument” (Habermas [1962] 1989, 36 Bächtiger et al. 2018, 6). Such a deliberative nature of communication suggests a flattening of hierarchies between authorities and society, which is characteristic of democracies.

Ukraine’s resilience subsequent to the full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 surprised the international community and enabled effective resistance despite asymmetric military spending and capacity between Ukraine and Russia. Though outside the scope of our analysis, we observe that the interaction patterns between authorities, business, and civil society representatives, which promoted the emergence of political will, persist as social practices of resistance. The new social contract, which began emerging in anti-corruption efforts, has seemingly buoyed Ukraine’s resilient response to the war.



The Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti), soon after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, still a symbol of people's sacrifice for overcoming the corrupt political regime.

Photo: Oksana Huss

Recommendations for strengthening communication efforts

To sustain both anti-corruption political will and democratisation more broadly, we recommend focussing policy attention and international donor support on three areas:

1. Support **multi-stakeholder platforms** that set out to define collective benefits (e.g. a vision for socio-economic development and/or revitalisation). A complex issue like corruption needs to be inclusive with all relevant stakeholders – authorities, civil society and business – onboard and trusting in each other's commitments. Regular interaction helps overcome distrust among these groups. Second, such interaction needs continuity and platforms should be institutionalised. Third, to ensure commitment, the collective benefits must be framed as positive outcomes, to which all stakeholders can ascribe. The negative connotations of “combatting corruption” by convicting perpetrators can hamper coordination.
2. Identify and support **actors that can facilitate communication** about anti-corruption policies and invest in strengthening their facilitation skills further. Facilitating institutions and agencies can be anti-corruption/integrity units or urban development agencies, which work professionally as bridges between authorities, civil society, and business. They need institutional support (funding for the space, salaries) to work long term, and technical support in facilitation techniques and methods, conflict resolution and stakeholder management.
3. Support **data collection and analysis skills** among employees of local authorities, especially in facilitating institutions and agencies. Functions like identifying strains of the corruption problem, and developing and vetting measures require that authorities can systematically evaluate their processes and alternative solutions, which requires collecting and/or handling qualitative and quantitative data. Often, methodological expertise can be outsourced, but the employees of local authorities must be able to assess what data they need, evaluate its quality and incorporate findings into developing policy solutions.

Discussion questions:

1. To what extent do you think inclusive stakeholder engagement procedures can help foster political will to address corruption, including to develop effective solutions and compliance with those solutions? What obstacles can prevent effective and productive communication and how might they be overcome?
2. Are there channels, platforms or forums for multi-stakeholder communication in the local arena? How well have these efforts contributed to defining and moving toward collective goals? What factors have enhanced or detracted from their effectiveness?
3. What skills are available to your locality in terms of facilitation, data collection and analysis? For example, are there relevant units, employees or perhaps partnerships with relevant universities or think tanks that could be harnessed to assist in reform efforts? If not, how might such skills be developed in the local setting?

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