

Anti-corruption on the front line: an interview with Sam Koim

by Grant Walton

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For those on the front line, fighting corruption in Papua New Guinea can be a dangerous occupation. It wasn't that long ago that a former Ombudsman Commissioner [was shot](#). Sam Koim, chairman of PNG's anti-corruption coordinating body, Taskforce Sweep, knows all about the dangers that come with the job. In February this year his office was ransacked. In [video footage](#) of the aftermath Sam looks down the camera lens in defiance; he asserts that the incident will not deter him or his team.

The office of Taskforce Sweep was targeted because of its success. It has registered over 200 cases of corruption, and recovered over 68 million PNG Kina (around \$A32million). It is this success that has meant Sam has become somewhat of a celebrity, sought by the media, researchers and policy makers. Despite his busy schedule, I managed to catch up with him while he was in Geelong for [Deakin University's Symposium on PNG](#). This blog post, based on our conversation, reports on Sam's perceptions about corruption, the taskforce, new anti-corruption organisations, the challenges facing anti-corruption organisations, solutions and the road ahead.

Taskforce Sweep is a multi-agency taskforce that was established by the National Government of PNG in August 2011. Initially set up to investigate allegations aimed at the Department of National Planning, the taskforce's mandate was subsequently extended to cover other government departments. Sam told me that the government recently agreed to support Taskforce Sweep until arrangements for a new anti-corruption institution are decided. As outlined in PNG's National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2010-2030, this new institution is likely to be an Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).

Establishing an ICAC in PNG is not a new idea. In the late 1990s, a proposed Organic Law on the Independent Commission Against Corruption failed to win parliamentary support. There is still concern about creating an ICAC in PNG: some fear that it would suck resources from established anti-corruption organisations,

such as the highly regarded but poorly resourced Ombudsman Commission. Sam was aware of these concerns, and acknowledged that any new anti-corruption institution could potentially ‘divert government attention away from existing agencies, or cause territorial conflicts [between agencies]’.

However, he was adamant that an ICAC could be effective if it was ‘appropriate for PNG’. This meant that any new institution should integrate into existing government systems and reflect local values. Sam warned against importing an ICAC model—such as those from New South Wales or Hong Kong—without considering the local context. To account for local complexities, he said that moves to install a new anti-corruption organisation must slowly evolve.

Asked to reflect on the success of Taskforce Sweep, Sam was modest, saying that that he would leave it up to others to judge. But he was satisfied with the ‘amount of deterrents that are being created’. He noted that, ‘in the past, people would do anything and steal [with impunity]; but now they know that somebody’s looking over their shoulders’. While Taskforce Sweep has recovered stolen money and has helped with the arrest of suspects, its conviction record is yet to be established. On this front, Sam hopes that he and others can learn from Indonesia’s anti-corruption commission, the *Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi* (KPK). Until recently the KPK had an impressive 100% conviction rate for corruption cases.

Australian media has quoted Sam as saying that half of PNG’s 7.6 billion kina development budget was lost to corruption between 2009 and 2011. Even with the difficulties of measuring corruption (corruption is conducted in secret making the extent of the problem difficult to gauge), this estimate is astounding. So I asked Sam why corruption has become a problem in PNG. In response he linked corruption to inequality. Seeing, reading and hearing about money in the midst of poverty brings about ‘frustration’, that means many Papua New Guineans don’t feel compelled to play by the rules, he said. Sam added that, as an ‘inclusive society’, many people benefit from corruption, which means they are less inclined to speak out against it. He was particularly concerned about the pressure on government workers to provide for their *wantoks*—literally ‘one talk’, a system of obligation between kin—means many public servants look for ways to augment their salary.

The Australian press also heavily publicised Sam’s concerns that Australia had become the preferred destination for money gained corruptly—in October 2012 he called Australia the **Cayman Islands of PNG**. In my interview with him, Sam didn’t back away from these comments. But he did say that he’s been happy with the way Australian officials have worked with him and his team since his speech. While wary about revealing details, he suggested that Australia is now doing a better job of identifying suspicious transactions from PNG and monitoring those accused of

corruption. This is perhaps evidenced by the [recent seizure](#) of businessman Eremas Wartoto's Queensland property by Australian authorities, and the [cancelling of his 457 visa](#). Wartoto is accused of misappropriating more than A\$30 million from the PNG government.

No discussion about corruption in the country would be complete without exploring PNG's multi-billion kina question: what is to be done? Sam believes that corruption can be curtailed in PNG through three interlinked strategies. First, he believes there needs to be greater focus on training honest public servants about the principles of good governance. Second, he wants to see government departments better coordinate their anti-corruption responses.

And finally, he would like to see legislative reform. As outlined in his speech during Deakin's symposium on PNG, he believes that laws need to be revised to better reflect PNG's diverse cultures. He would also like to see a stricter enforcement of the country's *Proceeds of Crime Act 2005*—an act that was considered ineffective by a [2011 report](#) [pdf] by the World Bank and the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering.

But all this, he suggests, will require political will, resources and incentives. In PNG, government departments and politicians need to actively support anti-corruption reform. He called for Australia to provide more money for anti-corruption initiatives. Sam also suggested that Australia condition its aid by allocating money to PNG based on the PNG government's willingness to tackle corruption.

There's not doubt that Sam and his team have achieved much despite the dangers associated with anti-corruption work in the country. Onlookers like myself wait to see if these efforts translate into convictions and what role Australia and other donors will play in supporting anti-corruption efforts in the future. As Sam suggests, if PNG does decide to establish an ICAC, it is critical that support for this new institution, through donors and the government, does not undermine existing anti-corruption efforts.

In the meantime, Sam and his team continue their fight against corruption. It's a tough job, but someone has to do it.

Grant W. Walton is a Research Fellow at the [Development Policy Centre](#).

Author/s:

Grant Walton

Grant Walton is an associate professor at the Development Policy Centre and the author of *Anti-Corruption and its Discontents: Local, National and International Perspectives on Corruption in Papua New Guinea*.

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