

Corruption and collective action

By Caryn Peiffer
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Why have anticorruption interventions largely failed to reduce corruption? The Developmental Leadership Program's (DLP) [recently released research paper](#), Corruption and Collective Action, describes and contributes to a growing policy debate on this question. Within the last couple of years, a new group of scholars have argued that anticorruption failure is a function of poor inspiration. Their argument is that anticorruption work has been wrongfully misled because it has relied on principal-agent theory to understand why corruption persists, but should have instead drawn from collective action theory.

To grossly simplify the perspectives, through the prism of principal-agent theory, corruption remains a persistent problem because of technical challenges of having to monitor and sanction corrupt behaviour. Collective action theory, on the other hand, has been recently applied to corruption to make sense of the fact that when corruption is widely seen as the norm, individuals will have little to gain from resisting temptation to be corrupt, if they can't trust others in their group, community or society to do the same. Through a collective action theory lens, corruption often persists because those tasked with monitoring and punishing corrupt transgressions feel that these measures will do little to change the fact that 'everyone is doing it.'

This paper problematizes this debate with three observations. First, collective action theory has been incompletely and narrowly applied to the issue of corruption. In addition to the role of perceptions of group members, it has much more to say about what influences collective action. Second, once the scope of potential contributions from collective action theory is widened, instead of being diametrically opposed, the insights for anticorruption work from both theoretical viewpoints prove to be complementary. Finally, and probably most crucially, both approaches have thus far failed to recognise the functionality of corruption (third perspective). Put differently, corruption persists because it solves social, political, and economic problems for those that engage in it. What makes anti-corruption effectiveness so very difficult to achieve is that, in many cases, initiatives need to take into account insights from all three perspectives. Without recognising that systemic corruption persists because it is difficult to fully monitor and punish (principal-agent theory), there is a widespread perception that everyone is doing it (collective action theory), and because it is used to solve problems that people face, anti-corruption efforts in many countries will continue to fail.

[Read the full paper here.](#)

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