Is education a magic bullet for addressing corruption? Insights from Papua New Guinea

by Grant Walton and Caryn Peiffer

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Picture this. You're at a party and, as can often happen (particularly in academic and development circles), conversation turns to corruption in developing countries. As beer bottles empty, and after discussing the pernicious effects of corruption and the lack of action by citizens to address it, someone passionately argues that corruption can only be reduced through education, and lots of it. If people really knew what corruption did to the economy and society then they wouldn't tolerate it.

But is this really the case? When it comes to fighting corruption, is education the magic bullet many people make it out to be?

In the development industry millions of dollars are spent educating citizens about the dangers of corruption, with the expectation that this will improve citizen reporting. Yet there is surprisingly very little research on what motivates citizen reporting, particularly in developing countries.

The literature that is available points to three factors that explain citizens' willingness to report corruption. The first, of course, is education. Even though there has been scant empirical work done to support some of these claims, the literature from developed and developing countries suggest that the more educated citizens are, the more likely they will report. The second explanation offered is that reporting is influenced by institutional trust. That is, if citizens don't trust that the state will act on corruption, they will be less likely to report it when they see it. Finally, there is a concern by some that a lack of institutional trust might cancel out the benefits of education altogether. Heather Marquette [pdf], for example, argues that even if citizens are well educated they won't report corruption if their level of trust in the state is low.

In a recent discussion paper released by the Developmental Leadership Program

and the Development Policy Centre we test these three claims in the context of Papua New Guinea. We draw on a household survey conducted in nine provinces with more than 1800 people. The survey included scenarios that depicted different types of corruption, and in this paper we analyse the factors that shaped respondents likelihood of reporting these scenarios to authorities.

In relation to the effect of education on reporting we found that:

- Higher levels of formal education increased the likelihood of a respondent being willing to report by up to 31 per cent, and this relationship was significant across 6 out of 8 scenarios;
- More frequent consumption of news increased the likelihood of reporting by up to 24 per cent, and this was significant across 4 out of 8 scenarios;
- Knowing how to report increased it by up to 78 per cent, which was significant across 4 out of 8 scenarios.

So, in most cases, higher levels of education (particularly formal education) improved willingness to report corruption.

Next, we looked at how trust that the state will respond to corruption affected reporting. While we looked at other types of institutional trust, one helped explain reporting the most – responses to the statement: 'there is no point in reporting corruption because nothing useful will be done about it'. We found that agreeing with this statement reduced the likelihood of being willing to report by up to 43 per cent, which was significant in 3 out of 8 corruption scenarios. So, lack of trust that corruption would be acted on diminished willingness to report, but less consistently across the scenarios than education.

How does institutional trust influence what impact education can have? Further analyses showed that when paired together, a belief that *something* would be done about corruption and higher levels of education results in improvement in the likelihood of being willing to report a corruption scenario by up to 32 per cent. But when people believe *nothing* will be done about corruption, the positive impact that education can have on reporting is estimated to dramatically fall. For instance, for half of the scenarios, our findings suggest that low levels of institutional trust completely nullify the positive impact that education had on reporting. The most dramatic reduction of reporting rates occurred with a scenario depicting corruption between a logging company and community – a popular example of corruption in PNG. Thus, in most cases, education's impact on willingness to report diminished with lower institutional trust.

What does all this mean?

Well, for a start it challenges the notion that citizen education on its own is a magic bullet for addressing corruption. Education is certainly important, but as one of us has argued previously, we need to be aware of its limitations. That's something to keep in mind when next discussing the potential of education to triumph over corruption.

In the context of PNG, the findings are sobering given recent events. The Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill, has effectively dismantled Taskforce Sweep, the country's successful, but short lived, anti-corruption taskforce. The long-running Ombudsman Commission has also been struck a blow, likely from political forces. Recently the Chief Ombudsman Commissioner, Rigo Lua, has been denied an opportunity to continue in his role. Lua has led the commission while it has investigated numerous MPs. These events undoubtedly reduce citizens' confidence that the state can and will prosecute corruption, and, according to this research, most certainly have worked to undermine citizens' willingness to report it.

In other words, the research provides yet another reason why attacking PNG's anti-corruption agencies is a bad idea.

Read the full paper here. Grant Walton is a Research Fellow with the Development Policy Centre. Caryn Peiffer is a Research Fellow with the Developmental Leadership Program at the University of Birmingham.

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*.

Caryn Peiffer
Caryn is a Lecturer in International Public Policy and Governance at the University of Bristol.

Link:
https://devpolicy.org/is-education-a-magic-bullet-for-addressing-corruption-insights-from-papua-new-guinea-20150617/