Understanding success and failure of anti-corruption initiatives

Most anti-corruption initiatives fail. This Brief sets out to understand why that is, and what might be done about it. Anti-corruption initiatives fail because of over-large "design-reality gaps"; that is, too great a mismatch between the expectations built into their design as compared to on-the-ground realities in the context of their deployment. Successfully-implemented initiatives find ways to minimise or close these gaps. Unsuccessful initiatives do not. Effective design and implementation processes enable gap closure and improve the likelihood of success. But, beyond enablers, it is the politics of the situation that determine the drivers to anti-corruption success.

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Failure of anti-corruption initiatives

Discussion and research centres too much on the "top and tail" of corruption – the causes and effects – and too little on the "heart" – the practical mechanisms for fighting it (Zuleta 2008). This Brief focuses on the heart; looking at the operational programmes and projects that are introduced to try to reduce corruption.

Current evidence is "dis-heart-ening". Most anti-corruption initiatives are associated with failure of some kind: "Anti-corruption Commissions (ACCs) have, with one or two exceptions, been a disappointment" (Williams & Doig 2007); anti-corruption policies in most countries "have not been overly successful" (Hussmann & Hechler 2008); international anti-corruption efforts in Africa are "a failure" (de Maria 2010). In summary, "there is mounting evidence that anti-corruption policies and mechanisms … often fail, and at times fail miserably" (Mutebi 2008).

Unfortunately, past antidotes to failure can seem contradictory (e.g. World Bank 2007, Hussmann & Hechler 2008, Zuleta 2008, Brinkerhoff 2010). On the one hand, there is the factor approach which provides a checklist of components or actions that should supposedly be included within all anti-corruption initiatives. On the other hand, there are numerous calls to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. How can we find a way through this conundrum: taking general factors into account, yet simultaneously being sensitive to individual anti-corruption initiatives and to local circumstances?

The design-reality gap model

Failure of anti-corruption initiatives is often seen as "by and large the result of an implementation problem" (Persson et al 2010). But the true problem has often begun well before implementation; inscribed into the design of these initiatives. Anti-corruption reforms are part of a more general global flow – of knowledge and ideas, of skills and techniques, of technologies and tools – from perceived epicentres in the industrialised world to transitional and developing economies.

Such flows are problematic because – through their designs – they carry with them parts of the world from which they came. All anti-corruption designs contain within them an inscribed "world-in-miniature" which we may call requirements or assumptions or expectations about the context into which the initiative is going to be deployed. This includes inscriptions about the technology that will be available; about the values that people will have; about organisational culture; about work processes and structures; and so forth.

Of course, if these design expectations matched the realities of the deployment context, implementation would run smoothly. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Design expectations do not draw directly, or even predominantly, from the world of the actors who deploy and use the anti-corruption initiative, but from the world of the designer, which conditions the perceptions of the designer about the world of the user. Gaps therefore arise between the design expectations built into anti-corruption initiatives, and the reality of the context of deployment, as summarised in Figure 1.

A review of initiatives and their outcomes demonstrates that, the larger the gap between design and reality, the greater the risk of failure (Heeks 2006). But how can this gap be measured?

A variety of checklists could be used. Here we offer a checklist of seven 'ITPOSMO' dimensions, which have been

Figure 1: Design-reality gaps in anti-corruption initiatives
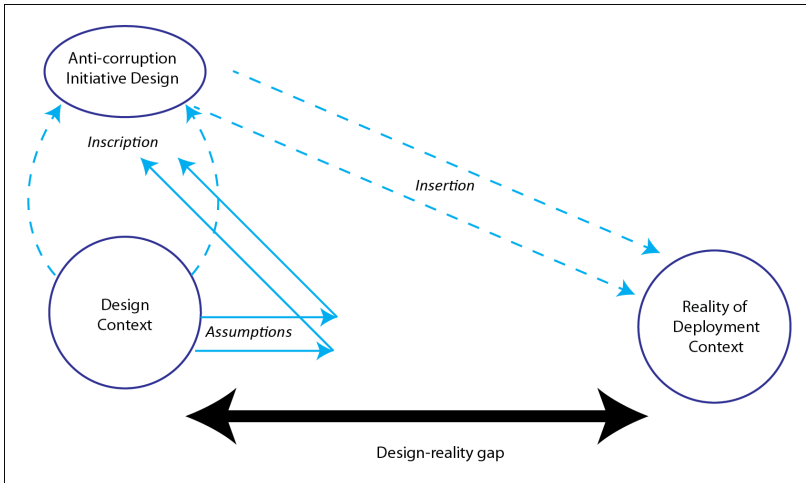
developed and tested on a series of cases in developing countries, including anti-corruption initiatives, and found to cover the key features of such initiatives (ibid.). They are: information (both formal and informal), technology (mainly information technology), processes (from individual tasks to broader business processes), objectives and values (covering formal strategies and personal goals, and the influence of informal institutional forces), staffing and skills (the quantitative and qualitative aspects of competencies), management systems and structures (the formal aspects of organisation), and other resources (especially time and money).

For each of the dimensions in turn, either an individual or a group of stakeholders can analyse two things. First the reality relating to that dimension within the deployment context.   Second, the assumptions and requirements relating to that dimension that are built into the initiative design. Any differences could be discussed qualitatively. But it can be helpful to convert the assessed gap between design and reality on each dimension into a numerical rating. For example, one could use a scale from zero to ten on which:

* 0 would indicate no difference between design and reality
* 5 would indicate some degree of difference between design and reality
* 10 would indicate complete and radical difference between design and reality.

Table 1: Design-reality gap ratings and project risks

Overall rating	Likely outcome
50 - 70	The anti-corruption initiative will almost certainly fail totally unless action is taken to close design-reality gaps.
43 - 56	The anti-corruption initiative may well fail totally unless action is taken to close design-reality gaps.
29 - 42	The anti-corruption initiative might fail totally, or might well be a partial failure unless action is taken to close design-reality gaps.
15 - 28	The anti-corruption initiative might be a partial failure unless action is taken to close design-reality gaps.
0 - 14	The anti-corruption initiative may well be successfully implemented.

Experience from past projects suggests that adding together the rating numbers for all seven ITPOSMO dimensions offers an estimate of the likelihood of either total or partial failure, as shown in Table 1 (ibid.). (Of course, there is no exact calibration here; hence the value of moving to inter-subjectivity by use of group ratings and discussion.)   These ratings can be used to guide risk assessment and change management for individual projects, or used to prioritise between different projects on the basis of risk.

For example, a democracy initiative was proposed in West Africa with the intention of reducing fraud and making the electoral process more transparent (Boateng & Heeks 2008). The gap between design and ex-ante reality was analysed using the ITPOSMO dimensions, with the result as shown in Table 2.

The overall gap rating total for the designed project was 36, suggesting – according to Table 1 – the possibility of partial or even total failure unless action was taken. In practice, the initiative was a partial failure due to the in-ability to close gaps by making the necessary changes to reality (especially the changes to technology, skills and process redesign) within the available time, so that only small parts of the system were operational for the election.

The externality of anti-corruption initiative designers

Anti-corruption initiatives can be designed by many differ-ent groups, but a common pattern is for designers to be, in some way, external to the context of deployment and use. These externalities can take different forms. For ex-ample, there may be a "disciplinary externality" when the designer is drawn from a different work domain to that of the main implementers, such as a legal rather than public management background or unit. The designer will char-acteristically have a different educational background, a different departmental culture, even a different "language" from those who are supposed to adopt the new initiative.

As noted above, there is also the "country externality" that arises when the design is taken from a different national context to that of the users. For example, Doig et al (2005) speak of Africa being "carpet-bombed" with an anti-cor-ruption commission model drawn from Hong Kong; a model designed within and for an entirely different set of resources and an entirely different set of "prevailing politi-cal, social and economic conditions" to the reality found in Africa.

In these situations designers will, wittingly or unwittingly, inscribe aspects of their design context into the anti-cor-ruption initiatives. They may try to incorporate elements of local reality into the design as well. However, as Figure 1 indicates, these are assumptions, and assumptions are not necessarily an accurate reflection of reality.   In one South Asian Planning Ministry, for instance, a system was introduced to help make budgeting decisions more trans-parent (Anonymous 2008). An overseas consultant led a design team that inscribed a set of assumptions about the

Table 2: Design-reality gaps analysis example

ITPOSMO Check-list	Inscribed Expectations in Design	Reality of Deployment Context	Design-Reality Gap Estimate
Information	Information would consist of the traditional set of constituency results, but flowing between different start and end points	Information content as per design, but with different information flow	4.5
Technology	The presence of an electronic scoreboard at national headquarters plus around 350 networked PCs, one in each constituency office	No HQ scoreboard; no PCs in constituency offices; most have faxes; a few have no phone or electricity	7.5
Processes	A new process of decentralised reporting, by which results could be declared in constituencies, then sent direct from constituencies to the central headquarters of the National Election Commission. (Voting process design no different to current reality.)	Faxing to regional NEC directors; then fax on to NEC HQ; constituencies not allowed to declare their own results.	5
Objectives and values	Elections should be determined on fair and rational grounds	Only a few overt hints of resistance to these values e.g. from staff at district level, but attitude of highest levels unclear	5
Staffing and skills	The presence of various technology installation skills prior to election, and of data entry skills and network operation and maintenance skills at election time	Only half the required number of IT staff available; no staff with data entry skills	6
Management systems and structures	The usual hierarchical management structures of the National Election Commission; regional and district offices administer election but not results	As per design except for results role of regional/district offices	2.5
Other resources	20 million US$ to be available to cover total costs; two-year timescale for implementation	Money available; time not available	5.5

processes and culture of the Ministry into the system, including the assumption that decision-making about project and programme budgets was formal, open and rational. In reality, decision-making in the Ministry had quite different qualities – it was informal, closed, and politicised – and this design-reality mismatch compromised the system's ability to function effectively.

The image portrayed here is that of a "rotten coconut". On the outside the organisation appeared to adhere to rational management norms. But beyond the immediate appearance the consultant found a politicised (and corrupt) inner reality driven by quite different informal institutional values. The designers stood on the outside, from different disciplines, from outside the Ministry and with leadership from overseas. Where they did engage with Ministry staff, the interaction was within the public discourse of organisational rationality, thus designing a fiction that bore little relation to the true functioning of the organisation.

Three design-reality gap outcomes

Using the model offered above, we could classify anti-corruption initiatives as typically falling into one of three design-reality gap outcomes. Some have a small design-reality gap right from the start. Because of the small gap, there is a small risk of failure, and a significant likelihood of successful implementation. However, because the design is not very different from the pre-existing reality, it makes little change to that reality, and so has relatively little impact on corruption. For example, some Indian government e-transparency projects have merely automated a few parts of their existing service processes (an approach Michael Hammer refers to as "paving the cowpaths". Those projects worked – their design was little different to previous reality – but they have made little difference to the number of citizens who must pay a bribe in order to get service (Bhatnagar & Singh 2010).

The converse is a project that starts with a large gap between design and reality. One outcome is that this gap remains large, and the project therefore fails in some way. Both the West African and the South Asian examples cited above fall into this outcome category.

However, anti-corruption initiatives with large initial gaps do not always end in failure. They may find a way – during implementation – to close those gaps, and achieve success. This might mean changing the design to bring it closer to existing reality; for example by reducing the scope and ambition of the project. It will almost certainly mean changing the reality to bring it closer to the design: that is what implementation invariably involves. Or it may mean a combination of these two.

Anti-corruption reforms within Bolivia's National Tax Service provide an example of a large design-reality gap successfully handled (Zuleta 2008). These reforms were ambitious, requiring changes on all of the ITPOSMO dimensions in order to combat widespread fraud. Steady changes over a number of years gradually closed the gaps by bringing reality in line with design expectations: different data was gathered on taxpayers; old and absent information technology was updated; the process for making tax payments was streamlined; more than 80% of staff were replaced and their skill sets were expanded; and so on. This gap closure created a new system that worked, with the level of tax evasion and the proportion of tax refunds (a key source of fraud) both significantly reduced.

Designing successful anti-corruption initiatives

Design of successful anti-corruption initiatives (meaning those which are successfully implemented; the extent of their success in combating corruption depends on their design objectives) requires us to pay attention to the "who" and "how" of the design process. One key will be the

extent to which designers are truly exposed to the realities of the deployment context. Good practice approaches to reality diagnostics are varied. For instance, some projects use soft systems methodologies including tools such as rich pictures, which map out the true nature of processes and interests. Other projects use embedding and participation. For example, when the Sri Lankan State Accounts Department decided to introduce a more transparent approach to publication of financial statements, enabled by the Web (Chandrasena 2008), it required the long-term presence of design consultants working alongside Departmental staff. This enabled the designers to move beyond the "discourse of rationality" to a closer contextual understanding. It also enabled greater staff participation in processes of design and implementation.

The profile of designers and key users also matters. One valuable profile found on successful anti-corruption initiatives is the "hybrid" who straddles design and reality, by understanding something of both worlds: understanding both how to design and how to fit such design to actual experience from the particular reality concerned. Examples include designers previously employed by the user agency, or users with experience of consulting on and implementing anti-corruption systems in other organisations.

These actions – exposing realities, embedding, participation, use of hybrids – are all ways to help ensure that elements far-removed from local realities do not creep into anti-corruption design. They could usefully be included when drafting ToRs for anti-corruption projects. However, design-reality gaps may still be large due to the ambition of the initiative. Factors like donor politics or government timescales may prevent this being altered. But in some cases, designers have found ways to break the project down into more "bite-sized" chunks. While the ambition of the whole is not lost, within each individual component design-reality gaps are sufficiently small to make successful implementation more likely.

The Bolivian tax reform cited above did this in two ways (Zuleta 2008). It was incremental; taking at least five years to make the necessary changes to reality. Had it adopted a "big bang" approach that sought to make these changes rapidly, failure would have been likely. It was also modular; designing three smaller, separate initiatives – one for each part of the tax service – rather than attempting a single, one-size-fits-all design.

When addressing design-reality gap closure, all the ITPOSMO dimensions are important. But six of them – ITPSMO – are largely technocratic matters. Put another way, if their design-reality gaps are sufficiently small or can be sufficiently closed, then they will enable the anti-corruption initiative to be successfully implemented. But they will not drive the initiative to succeed. For that, the real objectives and values of key stakeholders must match the design requirements; and a key – almost always implicit – design requirement is that powerful stakeholders must want corruption to be reduced and have the personal impetus and political will to make that happen. The middle "O" dimension – which encompasses both politics and culture – is therefore the most important; explaining why so much attention has recently been paid to the acknowledgement, analysis and handling of politics and culture in anti-corruption initiatives (e.g. Unsworth 2007, Brinkerhoff 2010). Closing design-reality gaps in relation to these will, above all, unlock the door to success.

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