

Unpacking the concept of political will to confront corruption

Quite often, “lack of political will” is identified as the culprit for poorly performing anti-corruption programmes. Yet despite the frequency with which it is used to explain unsatisfactory reform outcomes, political will remains under-defined and poorly understood. Further, assessments are often conducted retrospectively, looking back at failed programmes. By applying a model of political will that specifies a set of action-based components that are observable and measurable, and amenable to external reinforcement and support, more clarity regarding the degree of political will can be achieved.

Defining political will

The concept of political will is complex for several reasons. First, it involves intent and motivation, which are inherently intangible phenomena. They are hard to assess accurately or objectively and are prone to manipulation and misrepresentation. Second, it may exist at both individual and collective levels. For individuals, the notion of political will is understandable as a personal characteristic, reflecting a person’s values, priorities, and desires. Aggregating beyond the individual introduces more complexity. Third, though political will may be expressed in spoken or written words (speeches, manifestos, legal documents, and so on), it is only manifested through action. A shorthand definition of political will is: the commitment of actors to undertake actions to achieve a set of objectives – in this instance, reduced corruption – and to sustain the costs of those actions over time. The sections below specify how those actions can be analysed, leading to a clearer picture of what political will looks like, and how it can be assessed; and suggest options for strengthening it.

(Un)willing and (un)able?

Clarifying political will confronts two interrelated challenges. The first is determining what to observe that can provide a reliable basis for inferring the existence of political will. The second is distinguishing between will and capacity.

As for what to observe, the search for indicators of political will often starts with a focus on speeches and other public declarations by senior officials, passage of national legislation, and/or ratification of international compacts or treaties (e.g., the UN Convention against Corruption – UNCAC). Such pronouncements alone are insufficient signals of the presence of political will absent a connection to some form of concrete action. Inaction is often interpreted as an indicator of lack of political will. For example, failure to pass legislation, enforce sanctions, or pursue corruption cases in the courts have all been employed as negative indicators of political will. However, such indicators are problematic in that these failures can result from a variety of factors beyond simply insufficient motivation or low prioritisation, including reasons such as low levels of capacity, political or institutional rivalries, etc.

In the search for a positive indicator of political will, some analysts have employed dedicated public spending as a tangible expression of prioritised political intent, reflecting the economist Joseph Schumpeter’s often quoted aphorism, that “[t]he budget is the skeleton of the state stripped of all misleading ideologies.” Anderson et al. (2005), for example, propose indicators for what they call willingness for poverty reduction that include pro-poor public expenditure, immunisation rates, and so on. Such indicators provide a macro-level view both of political priorities and of capacity (in the basic sense of resource availability), but they do not go very far in helping to reveal the complexities of political will.

As the familiar phrase, “willing and able,” conveys, will and capacity are closely connected. Morrissey and Verschoor (2006) note that country decision-makers’ assessments of their capacity to implement reforms influence their willingness to make upfront commitments. Thus, what may look to outsiders like a lack of political will can be linked instead to insufficient capacity. The political calculus is, “best not to try if we aren’t sure we have the means to make progress.” Anti-corruption programmes that require new skills, mechanisms, procedures, and resources may hinder the emergence of political will where would-be reformers are not confident that they have sufficient capacity for implementation. Such policy reforms call for a set of strategic management capacities beyond those needed for discrete project implementation (Brinkerhoff and Crosby 2002, Collins and Higgins 2000). Particularly important for pursuing sustainable anti-corruption reforms is building cross-sectoral coalitions of support to create a critical mass of public officials, civil society groups, and private firms (Johnston and Kpundeh 2002). The box on page 2 offers a simple summary of policy reform capacities, whose associations with political will are readily apparent in the model presented below.

An enabling environment for political will and capacity to combat corruption

Whether actors are willing and able to combat corruption is affected by the socio-political and bureaucratic environment in which they operate. Each of the three reform management capacities in Box 1 is subject to environmental constraints. Andrews (2008) talks about the emergence of political will as a function of the extent to which reformers have access to, and can create space for, reform. Malena (2009) discusses how political will is influenced by what she calls political “can” and political “must.” The former she defines as capacity, and the latter she characterises as made up of public pressure and citizen engagement, organisation-

Policy reform capacities

A conceptual “shorthand” for strategic management capacities consists of the ability to: 1) look outward, 2) look inward, and 3) look ahead.

Looking out. Reformers need to extend their focus beyond the boundaries of their individual agencies, i.e., becoming more aware of who and what is “out there,” and figuring out how to respond appropriately. This calls for capacity to identify key stakeholders, create opportunity space for dialogue and participation, coordinate joint action, set feasible objectives, build constituencies for change, and resolve conflicts.

Looking in. Efficient internal structures, systems, and procedures are important for achieving results. Critical to this kind of capacity are efficient and effective ways to design and implement programmes; set up and manage organisations; manage and motivate staff; and allocate, monitor, and account for financial and other resources.

Looking ahead. The third capacity category relates to bringing together strategy, structure, and resources to achieve reform goals. It is the capacity to be anticipatory and proactive, monitor and adapt. It extends as well to intangible capabilities, such as leadership and visioning. (Source: Adapted from Brinkerhoff and Crosby [2002])

al rules and regulations, and a personal sense of civic duty. The ability to create space and to assemble political “must” depends upon a positive enabling environment.

The major environmental enabling factor is the quality of governance. Without at least some governance structures and procedures that establish checks and balances among the various branches of government and enable citizens to voice their concerns and hold officials accountable to some degree, political will to tackle corruption is likely to be weak, as is the ability to pursue reforms. Good governance is most often identified with democracy. However, not all democracies are equally democratic. Countries labelled as democracies vary significantly in the extent to which their governance practices approach the ideal democratic principles of checks and balances or of accountability. In such political systems – referred to as “democracy with adjectives” by Collier and Levitsky (1997), or “illiberal democracy” by Zakaria (1997) – governance is unlikely to support political will to fight corruption. So it is important to avoid assumptions that nominally democratic governance practices automatically provide a nurturing environment for anti-corruption reforms and the political will to pursue them.

Poor governance is often associated with a culture of impunity, where public officials feel little obligation to be accountable to citizens, and citizens have limited expectations that their elected leaders should be accountable to them. This situation reinforces monopolies on power, which undermine the operation of institutional checks and balances, and create an atmosphere of tolerance for corrupt practices. In such an environment, officials face few pressures for changed behaviour. The power of vested interests remains strong, while reformers find little traction to build coalitions to address corruption problems. Further, poor governance constrains the emergence of a strong civil society and disempowers citizens who could become advocates for anti-corruption policies and programmes.

Thus, political will to address corruption and the associated capacities to move from intent to action depend upon an enabling governance environment that provides incentives, authority, and operating space. While this statement may sound tautological – anti-corruption requires good governance, which is characterised by an absence of corruption

– it highlights the need for sufficient space to initiate some form of action, whether simply a public dialogue on corruption, or a more ambitious reform agenda. Because the relationships between the enabling environment and political will and capacity are not all one-way, reform success can in some cases contribute to better governance, more empowered civil society, and the break-up of vested interests and patronage networks.

Because of worldwide concerns about corruption, the relevant enabling environments that can bolster political will extend beyond national borders to the transnational level. The global governance environment for fighting corruption is replete with potential contributors to political will. These include a variety of international conventions and processes beyond UNCAC, such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, the Publish What You Pay campaign, the Kimberley Process to stem trade in conflict diamonds, and Transparency International’s annual Corruption Perception Index, to name a few. The motivating power of these various initiatives derives from their impact on business investment and foreign aid allocations, in addition to reputation (e.g., no national leaders want their country to be at the bottom of TI’s list among the countries with the highest corruption scores). Donors, for their part, are seeking to address accountability and anti-corruption goals through reforms in international aid modalities, such as agreeing on coordinated responses to poor governance, or experimenting with ex-post conditionality or progress-based aid approaches. For example, “cash-on-delivery” aid is intended to increase transparency and to reward country leaders after meeting performance targets (Birdsall and Savedoff 2010). Such approaches can enable political will by providing country actors with the resources and the motivation to be accountable to their citizens for concrete results.

Deconstructing political will enables identification and assessment

A clearer picture of political will emerges from disaggregating it into meaningful and measurable components. Drawing on the author’s earlier work (Brinkerhoff 2007 and 2000, Brinkerhoff and Crosby 2002) and supported by analyses of pro-poor policy design and implementation (Anderson et al. 2005, Morrissey and Verschoor 2006), political will can be separated into seven components:

- 1. Government initiative.** This component concerns the source of the impetus for a particular anti-corruption policy or programme choice. Political will is suspect when the push for change comes totally from external actors. Some degree of initiative from country decision-makers must exist in order to talk meaningfully of political will.
- 2. Choice of policy/programme based on technically sound, balanced consideration and analysis of options, anticipated outcomes, and cost/benefits.** When country actors choose anti-corruption policies and actions based on their own assessments of the likely benefits to be obtained, the alternatives and options, and the costs to be incurred, then one can credibly speak of independently derived preferences and willingness to act.
- 3. Mobilisation of stakeholders.** This component concerns the extent to which government actors consult with, engage, and mobilise stakeholders. Do decision-makers reach out to members of civil society and the private sector to advocate for the changes envisioned? Are legislators involved? Are there ongoing efforts to build constituencies in favour of anti-corruption policies and programmes?

4. Public commitment and allocation of resources. To the extent that country decision-makers reveal their policy preferences publicly and assign resources to achieve those announced policy and programme goals, these actions contribute to a positive assessment of political will.

5. Application of credible sanctions. Without effective sanctions, corruption cannot be reduced. Well crafted and enforced sanctions, both negative and positive, signal serious intent to address corruption. Symbolic and/or selective enforcement points to half-hearted political will.

6. Continuity of effort. Fighting corruption requires resources and effort over the long-term. One-shot or episodic efforts signal weak and/or wavering political will.

7. Learning and adaptation. Political will is demonstrated when country actors establish a process for tracking anti-corruption policy/programme progress, and actively manage reform implementation by adapting to emerging circumstances. Learning can also apply to country policymakers observing policies, practices, and programmes from other countries and selectively adopting them for their own use.

Strong ratings on each of these seven components sum up to the most powerful manifestation of political will. Variations in ratings on the components permit detailed, situation-specific assessment, allowing for nuanced considerations of degrees of political will, from weak to strong. Political will is not usefully conceived of as a binary variable (yes, it is there, or no, it is not). Rather, political will should be assessed in terms of relative degree of presence/absence, and in terms of whether it is positive or negative. In some situations certain actors may be motivated to hinder or actively undermine anti-corruption reforms. Such assessments can be conducted for specific actors, across categories of actors, or for different anti-corruption policies or programmes. The seven components also suggest where donors might target support to strengthening political will.

Strengthening political will to confront corruption

The sources of motivation for mobilising to confront corruption are most often seen as coming from the top levels of a country's political system, frequently embodied in prominent individuals. Well-known examples are Paul Kagame, the current president of Rwanda; Lee Kuan Yew, prime minister of Singapore from 1959-1990; Benjamin Mkapa, president of Tanzania from 1995-2005; and Ronald MacLean-Abaroa, former mayor of La Paz, Bolivia.

However, it is important to recognise that political will does not flow only from the top down. There are bottom-up sources of political will as well. In some cases, these sources may be so-called "street level bureaucrats," that is, public officials on the frontlines of service delivery who are strongly committed to controlling, preventing, and exposing waste, fraud, and abuse. In other cases, they are located outside the state, residing in citizens' groups, civil society organisations, and the private sector. The willingness of these actors to tackle corruption issues, to engage in whistle-blowing, to voice concerns and demands, and to bring pressure on public officials is a well recognised contributor

to strengthening political will and to sustaining reform. As with any reform, addressing anti-corruption reform only from the top-down with supply-side interventions is insufficient. Bottom-up, demand-driven inputs are critical to success.

These lessons from reform implementation constitute the practical backdrop to identifying where and how donors can direct their support to reinforcing political will. The following table provides some illustrative suggestions, demonstrating how common reform efforts support each of the seven components of political will.

It is immediately apparent that many of the suggested actions constitute interventions that are part and parcel of well recognised anti-corruption and governance programmes. While donors already support many such interventions in different countries, this table clarifies where these programme initiatives may relate to the components of political will. Thus donors, in planning their support to a country's anti-corruption agenda, can assess possible interventions through the lens of their likelihood to build critical elements of political will. These might change with the sector or institution involved. Political will is never static, and will shift over time, calling for a graduated and flexible approach. This analysis also highlights the importance of assessing anti-corruption reform in a holistic manner, to assure that the most feasible and appropriate reforms are pursued at any given time. In addition, donors face the challenge of aligning the outcomes of such a perspective with assistance needs identified through other assessments (e.g., the UNCAC-related self-assessment by governments).

Starting with the locus of initiative for reform, donors can choose to work with actors that have already signalled a willingness to confront corruption, and/or they can seek to build local ownership for international initiatives. The idea here is to identify and support country champions to take the lead in pursuing reform. Political will begins with country advocates who see fighting corruption as a high priority.

Options to strengthen components of political will

Political will component	Illustrative options for donors	
	Top-down, supply side	Bottom-up, demand side
Government initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and support public officials committed to anti-corruption reforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and support civil society watchdogs and media
Technically sound, cost-effective policy and programme choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide technical assistance in anti-corruption policy analysis, formulation, priority-setting, programme design, and analysis of the costs of corruption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide technical assistance in citizen satisfaction surveys, including for public service delivery
Mobilisation of stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support public education campaigns, outreach to citizens' groups and the private sector Support participatory governance that brings citizens and government officials closer together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide support to civil society constituency building and advocacy coalitions Encourage CSO-private sector partnerships
Public commitment and allocation of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support ceremonial events where public officials make anti-corruption commitments, e.g., integrity pledges Support national/sectoral budget formulation processes, as well as external auditing structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support CSOs engaged in PETS and participatory budgeting exercises
Application of credible sanctions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support rule of law reform; training for investigators, lawyers and judges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer training for watchdog organisations and journalists
Continuity of effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide multi-year funding for anti-corruption programmes Use diplomatic tools to support reformers facing challenges Support institutionalisation of accountability relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide grants to CSOs, encourage media to publicise successful anti-corruption efforts
Learning and adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support progress monitoring, evidence-based decision-making, programme evaluation Support institutional twinning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support transnational civil society engagement, South-South cooperation

Donors traditionally offer technical assistance which relates most closely to two of the components of political will: the technical soundness and degree of analytical rigour in anti-corruption solutions, and the application of credible sanctions. A danger to avoid is the tendency for the technical details of solutions to become the driving preoccupation, rather than a mix of technical fit and political feasibility. To the extent that solutions and sanctions become externally determined or dominated, the locus of initiative begins to slip away from indigenous actors, with negative impacts on political will and ownership.

Donors can also undertake measures relating to stakeholder mobilisation and continuity of effort. Assistance can be provided to reformers, both inside and outside of government, to develop coalition-building and mobilisation strategies, and design publicity campaigns. Donors need to be sensitive to the complexity of incentives for collective action to address corruption. The most obvious incentive is the long-term goal of reducing corruption with the ultimate benefits of clean government, better services, and more economic investment. As Johnston and Kpundeh (2002) note, the will to pursue this long-range goal depends upon other, more immediate incentives associated with social solidarity: prestige, recognition, mutual aid and protection (e.g., safety in numbers, since confronting corrupt practices can be dangerous).

Regarding continuity of effort, donors can be instrumental in providing the financial resources that allow for ongoing implementation of anti-corruption efforts. They can also support monitoring and reporting efforts that contribute to continuity, as well as to learning and adaptation. Because political events may result in changes in the country's anti-corruption actors or shift their degree of political will or space to operate, contributing to continuity of effort may involve revisiting donor support related to the other components of political will. This may also involve employing diplomatic tools to support anti-corruption reformers who face political challenges to their efforts.

Conclusions

The principles of country-led development and ownership, along with donor-country partnership, can only be enacted in practice if country actors and donors share similar objectives and priorities. Donors tend to see confirmation that country counterparts share their goals as expressions of political will. Yet, as this Brief has discussed, political will involves more than adoption of an agenda shaped by international actors, such as ratifying UNCAC or passing an anti-corruption law. Signing on to the Convention or approving a law may be one step, but genuine political will concerns the extent to which country actors engage to publicly support anti-corruption measures and build coalitions of other actors to sustain momentum, develop sound technical programmes to implement reforms, take actions that demonstrate resource commitments and the enforcement of meaningful sanctions, and pursue implementation consistently over time while assuring monitoring and adaptation to emerging circumstances. The connections between capacity and will suggest that capacity building can have a positive impact on political will, but clearly capacity is only part of the picture. The enabling environment is key as well. If the environment creates disincentives for the actors involved, and if their own particular interests reinforce those disincentives, the possibility arises that actors don't just lack political will but that political will may be negative. That is, actors may be motivated to pursue actions that make corruption worse.

The essence of political will – negative or positive – has to do with people; it emerges primarily as a function of the relationships and social, political and economic dynamics among actors within a country, as well as international factors that create incentives for and against reform. The tendency to attribute political will to aggregate levels (e.g., ministries or whole governments), while conceptually convenient, often leaves vague and unspecified exactly who is committed to do what. This Brief offers a model of political will that specifies a set of action-based components that are: a) observable and measurable beyond a simple “present-absent” determination, and b) amenable to external reinforcement and support. Applying the model can increase clarity regarding the degree of political will.

However, the operative element of political will in a given country is local politics. Donors, as various observers have noted, are often less than adept at dealing with country politics. Combating corruption cuts to the core of politics, requiring confrontation with often powerful, diverse, and competing interests. Building political will to fight corruption necessitates a process approach to change, calling for incremental steps toward the objective. Donors may be frustrated by the apparent slow pace, but would do well to curb their impatience and look for opportunities to support “home-grown” initiatives in the countries they are partnering with.

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