THE FLETCHER SCHOOL

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

The Nexus: Corruption, Conflict & Peacebuilding Colloquium

Thought Piece: What is corruption in conflict zones?

Fighting corruption has become an increasingly important topic for governments of the industrialized donor nations and the institutions whose membership they dominate. The World Bank and US government are at the forefront of this agenda, though most of the European nations have subsequently added it to their foreign aid policies in recent years.

Despite the increasing attention placed on this issue by the international community, very little exchange occurs between those working on conflict/peacebuilding and those engaged in fighting corruption. The de-facto pillars operate simultaneously and often in overlapping sectors yet without co-ordination or purposeful mitigation of possible consequences (positive or negative) each may have on the other.

The Institute for Human Security within the Fletcher School at Tufts University hosted a select group of thinkers and policy makers to discuss the critical questions related to the nexus of conflict, corruption and peacebuilding on April 13, 2007. The ***purpose*** of the event was threefold:

1.) Finalize a map of existing research and activity related to the nexus;
2.) Exchange views and ascertain thinking about gaps and emerging questions; and
3.) Determine the questions of significance for a research agenda and attendant activities moving forward

In preparation for the colloquium, each participant was asked to draft a short ***Thought Piece*** on a specific aspect of the agenda in order to fuel the discussion. These pieces were intended to be 'food for thought' and not academic, formal publications;[1] nor were they intended to be made public. However after much discussion regarding the paucity of existing literature it was felt, where authors permitted, that there was value in making them available.

For further information on the Colloquium, contact Professor Cheyanne Church at Cheyanne.church@tufts.edu or visit http://fletcher.tufts.edu/corruptionconf/index.html .

[1] Further information on the agenda and the parameters provided on the Thought Pieces may be found on the Colloquium website.

THE NEXUS: CORRUPTION, CONFLICT & PEACEBUILDING THOUGHT PIECE

WHAT IS IT*?* CORRUPTION IN CONFLICT & POST-CONFLICT ZONES

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With regard to the question of what corruption is, I believe the insights that anthropology can provide come through the discipline's ability to consider, examine, and try to understand corruption from the perspective of the people who engage in it, but also through paying theoretical attention to question of what the concept of corruption is as a way of seeing the world. Arguably, the idea of corruption has become an organizing lens through which people in many contemporary societies explain and lay blame for a range of failings with regard to democracy, development, and other expectations of modernity. While discourses about corruption seem to be wielded by people in developed countries against people in developing countries for political and disciplinary purposes, it is also quite remarkable how widely the concept of corruption has been adopted and appropriated by people in developing countries as a way of talking about, understanding, and sometimes resisting aspects of inequality and injustice in their societies. As an organizing idea for understanding the world (and as a set of practices) corruption can be both a strategy of the powerful and a weapon of the weak.

Acknowledging and trying to better understand the political uses and discursive dimensions of corruption should not, however, deflect us from confronting the fact that, by almost any definition, corruption is a pervasive social problem. In countless contexts – including, for our purposes, in times of conflict and processes of peacebuilding – people engage in, benefit from, and are victimized by corruption. Thus, when we consider what corruption is, we need to interrogate it not only as a powerful and organizing idea that serves different purposes in relation to the social positions of the groups or actors who deploy it, but also as a set of practices that have different meanings shaped by heterogeneous but nevertheless identifiable patterns of interests.

Conventional definitions of corruption assume the existence of a bureaucratic state and hinge on the presumption of a clear distinction between public and private interests and goods. Joseph Nye's widely quoted definition ("Corruption is behavior

which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains" (1967:419)) is emblematic of this view. Yet, as a large literature on Africa and Nigeria (where I work) suggests, the distinction between public and private/personal interests and goods is complicated by a host of factors, including a more collective sense in many societies of private/personal interests, where people's identities, loyalties and reputations are closely linked to kinship groups, place of origin, and other collectivities (Ekeh 1975; Joseph 1987; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Smith 2007). As a result, people who engage in corruption are often doing so not so much to enrich themselves as individuals, but to share with their collectivities the benefits that accrue from access to the state. Considerable evidence has demonstrated that individuals with access to the state (or international institutions) come under great pressure to secure a share for themselves and their people (Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Smith 2001; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006).

In Nigeria, ordinary people talk about securing state resources (including via corruption) as getting a share of "the national cake." When people talk this way it signals their understanding that in Nigeria (as in many places) one gets access to social resources through ties of kinship, patronage and other social connections rather than through more bureaucratically transparent mechanisms or by some sort of objective merit. People commonly see the state as hopelessly corrupt and decide quite rationally that engaging with it on purely bureaucratic terms will yield little benefit. While some might argue that it is precisely these assumptions and practices that keep the bureaucratic state from functioning effectively, plenty of evidence suggests that powerful historical and structural reasons explain why so many developing countries have failed to establish more effective and transparent bureaucracies. These explanations lie in the legacies of colonialism and in contemporary macro-structural inequalities in our interdependent global world – but these are topics well beyond the scope here (Mamdani 1996; Mbembe 1999; Bayart 2000). Regardless of where one attributes the origins of corruption, it is quite clear that in places like Nigeria, corruption is so intractable because it unfolds in a vicious cycle where people rely on corruption because the state functions poorly and the state functions poorly because people presume and act as if corruption is the only means to sharing in the national cake.

In my ethnographic study of corruption in Nigeria (which did not focus explicitly on issues of conflict and peacebuilding), a striking set of seeming contradictions emerged over and over again. Ordinary Nigerians were at once: 1) participants in corruption and its social reproduction, 2) victims of corruption's most pernicious social effects, and 3) tremendously self-conscious about their paradoxical role as participants and victims. At an empirical ethnographic level the paradox is exemplified by the fact that most Nigerians condemn, in the abstract, politicians who use political office to award state resources to their kin and communities, but when their own relative achieves a position of influence those same people will apply considerable pressure on that person to use his position for just such purposes. At first pass, it may appear as if it is simply a question of people condemning corruption when it profits others and favoring it when it benefits them. There is certainly some truth to this, but a more adequate explanation should focus on the competing but intertwining moral economies within which people interpret behavior and make decisions.

Although these competing moral economies can be separated only for heuristic purposes, as they are lived in simultaneously by real people, they can be usefully contrasted in terms of the idioms of accountability they privilege (Gore and Pratten 2003). On the one hand, people in Nigeria (and, I would argue, people in many societies) live in a moral economy dominated by the ethics of kinship, reciprocity and patron-clientism. In this register, one's first obligation is to one's people and the modern state is perceived and engaged with primarily in terms of what it can deliver (or how it thwarts) the most important obligations of a good person – to secure resources for the social groups to which one belongs. One the other hand, people are well aware of the expected ideal functions of contemporary nation-states – epitomized most profoundly by the promises of democracy and development. In my experience, ordinary people in places like Nigeria are remarkably attuned to these issues and are often acutely disappointed with the failures of their states to perform.

The complexity of corruption comes in the intertwining of these moral economies and idioms of accountability, such that ordinary citizens have to participate in the patronage system in order to have any access to the resources of the state, while elites are able to utilize the facades of the state and the structures of patronage for alternative

purposes. That is, elites play the bureaucratic card to truncate their obligations to ordinary people and they play the patronage/reciprocity card to justify looting the state. At a distance, ordinary folk seem to know exactly what is going on. No discourse of complaint in Nigeria is stronger than people's discontents about corruption. But closer-up people are bound to participate in their own undoing. A combination of the real hardships people face in order to survive and the relative reliability of kinship, reciprocity and patronage as leverage through which to extract some support from elites push ordinary citizens into promoting and participating in the very acts they condemn.

In Nigeria at least, some forms of corruption are much more aggrieving than others. People perceive that forms of corruption no longer rooted in a moral economy of kinship are on the rise (Apter 1999; Smith 2007). The common term in Nigeria for these forms of corruption is "419" (pronounced "four-one-nine"), and such forms of corruption are marked by deception that is undertaken solely for the purposes of individual enrichment and self-aggrandizement. While patrons who loot the state to share with their people are often admired and socially rewarded by their kin and communities but resented from a distance by those who do not benefit, people who practice 419 are generally despised and condemned by everyone. When they are not universally condemned (419 men do succeed in buying status and prestige) this is popularly interpreted as the truest sign of the moral decline and ultimate demise of the entire society. The concept of 419 as it is understood and wielded in Nigeria suggests that at the intersection of kinship and the state forms of corruption have emerged that are unacceptable in either idiom.

In the contexts of conflict and peacebuilding, all of this suggests that corruption is many different things, and that pragmatically useful definitions and understandings need to be grounded in ethnographic realities. Arguably, many conflicts begin precisely because of people's discontents about the kinds of inequalities and injustices frequently associated with processes labeled as corruption (e.g., Richards 1996). Yet it can be hard to know when parties in a conflict aim to combat corruption and when they are in conflict to control the institutions through which they may benefit from corruption. Surely, it can be both or become both.

I believe my ethnographic work on corruption in Nigeria suggests several pertinent lessons for approaching the question of the intersection of conflict, corruption and peacebuilding. First, most of what outsiders label and condemn as corruption is undertaken by ordinary people for sound, rational reasons. It makes no sense to try to combat corruption if we don't understand why people are doing what they are doing so that, when warranted, we can help them find alternative means to achieve their ends. Second, there are indeed aspects of corruption in contemporary societies (including, I presume, in societies in the midst of or emerging from violent conflict) that almost everyone condemns. These are the forms of corruption about which we should be more troubled and on which we should be focused. These forms of corruption are most associated with elites using the facades of the state (and their international ties) to empower and enrich themselves without sharing any of the cake, so to speak. Finally, these most aggrieving forms of corruption are most closely connected with the structures of inequality from which we in developed countries benefit most directly, but which are conveniently not labeled as corruption. The concept of corruption has been elevated to an organizing idea that marks some forms of behavior and structures of inequality as unacceptable -- and subject to scholarly conferences, government policies, U.N. interventions and so forth. But other -- arguably even more powerful and pernicious -- processes and structures of inequality remain unmarked and considerably less addressed. I have always been struck by how much more apparent this is to people in places like Nigeria than it is to us, and it suggests to me that we tread carefully in deciding who and what to label as corrupt and what we might do about it.

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