

A Helpful Response to Unhelpful Research, and a Call for Ideas

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By Dr. Mark Pyman

In January, Mark Pyman wrote a blog on this site on the unhelpful nature of anti-corruption research. Now Mark shares the key points from the many thoughtful and thought provoking responses it elicited. Inspired by the responses, he suggests what could be done to accelerate the usefulness of anti-corruption research, and ends with a call for ideas.

In January, I wrote a blog on this site on the unhelpful nature of anti-corruption (AC) research. Speaking as a practitioner, currently working on curbing corruption in Afghanistan and in Greece, I was – and am – frustrated that so much of the corruption research literature focuses on corruption as a problem, not on solving the problem.

The blog elicited a lot of responses, (both on the blog and in my inbox) all of them thoughtful and thought-provoking. Almost all the respondents felt that I was at least sort-of-right, and that the current thrust of anti-corruption research needs to change.

The key points were 1) Too many researchers seem to like nothing more than to ‘admire the problem’. 2) We are desperately missing real sector-level insight. There are some good analyses, but these treasures are few and far between. 3) Why isn’t the whole anti-corruption research community moving away from diagnosis towards treatment? Surely, we have got to the point where researchers should be trying out approaches, such as new technical indexes at the sector level, to see whether they can help diagnosis

and reform? And 4) Surely, we can get beyond yet more analyses of context, into analyses of the success or failure of specific reform efforts and how context affects this?

So, what can we do better?

Skip to: What research is out there that is good? or What could we do to accelerate the usefulness of anti-corruption research?

Your suggestions

First, I have collated the main points that appeared in the responses, as well as my take on them. I have organised them under the following headings: (1) getting published, (2) the theory around corruption, (3) the diagnosis of corruption, (4) the possible strategies and response measures, (5) country experiences, (6) making change happen and (8) sustaining change.

1. Getting published

Several respondents commented that practical experience, case studies and good results were not sufficient to get published, especially in academic, peer-reviewed journals. As one person put it, 'theoretical and abstract' pieces are favoured by good journals, and publications in good journals can make or break careers. This is not particular to corruption research, as the same being true in many social sciences, such as criminology.

There is, thankfully, now a trend to demand that research be published in open source, peer-reviewed journals, but it is still by no means the norm.

Other respondents made the point that practitioners are never going to write up their experiences for academic journals, or even for simple websites, unless they are forced to do so.

Another made the point that it would help if donor agencies required 'donees' to have some sort of M&E research running in parallel with their projects.

I share these views. On the academic hand, everything surely has to be available on an open source platform or available as a summary on open platforms. On the practitioner hand, **we need a culture where everyone writes up something about their work that at least lets the whole global AC community know that something was done on this topic/ in this country/at this time/ with roughly the following result.**

2. 'Theory of government' research

The complex nature of governance and state building across the centuries, which provides the context for any theory of corruption has been the subject of a great deal of recent interesting academic work, such as **North et al (*Violence and Social Orders*)** and **Acemoglu & Robinson (*Why Nations Fail*)**. The emerging wisdom

is that we need to place the governance discourse in the context of a thorough understanding of elite bargains permitting or inhibiting effective collective action emerging from intra-elite struggles and the consequent political settlements. This is hugely helpful to anti-corruption work, not least because it is important to recognise the intensely political nature of the whole anti-corruption discourse. We are addressing issues that go to the very heart of the political process. Corruption is an essential ingredient in the struggle for political power and for those in power on how to keep it.

On the theory around corruption, respondents agree that there has been significant progress in recognizing, for example, the deficiencies of principal-agent theory and the potential advantages of collective action theory. But also, they are not substitutes – each might explain some parts of corrupt behavior – and the quest for one overall theory is probably misplaced. **Rather, we are still in the age of the alchemists, trying to make sense out of issues we don't yet have more granular understanding of.**

Speaking as an experimentalist, whilst it would make our lives much easier if we had a robust theoretical base, we can get a long way without one. For example, at the analysis end, we segment the problem as much as we can, we gather up all the known evidence within each segment, and we do our best to connect the nature of the solutions being used to each particular context.

3. Better diagnosis of the corruption issues

One respondent summed it up by saying ‘we don't yet have any standard diagnosis tools’. This is a bit of a shame, to say the least. There is also little research on whether diagnoses were correct or incorrect. In the sector I know best – defence – there is now a standard diagnosis tool, but it seems to be a lone example.

4. Strategies and measures for tackling corruption

Several respondents noted that corruption needs a lot more breaking down before either the research or the prescriptions can be useful in practice. Just focusing at the national level gives little prescriptive power. On the one hand, corruption increasingly has a large international element, through vehicles such as shell companies, international banking, service companies and international aid.

On the other hand, **respondents stressed the need for much, much more focus on sector-level corruption:** in education, health, the police and so on. As one respondent put it, ‘Like you I work on sector corruption problems, and here the air is very thin’.

5. Country experiences

Most responses related to this element. There were quite a few good examples quoted. But several respondents noted that the issue is not so much the experiences that are lacking, it's the lack of a guiding framework on whether they could or could not work in

other context. There are also several relatively new programmes that focus on constructive country solutions, such as Anticorpp, J-PAL, ISS and the new DFID ACE programmes through SOAS and the British Academy.

6. Strategies for making change happen

Regarding the critical aspect of strategies for making change happen, participants pointed to several strategies that come out of the research literature, such as those from Klitgaard, Khan and Mungiu-Pippidi.

7. Sustaining change

This is still, to my mind and to others, a research-free zone. There was an impassioned plea from one of the key anti-corruption actors in Guatemala: “The problem is not in the usefulness or not of the research, but in that to bring about real changes it is necessary that many factors, knowledge, will of change, leadership and available resources need to come together. In Guatemala, we are living a unique experience with the creation of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, which has succeeded in bringing to justice numerous networks of corruption in all sectors of the State. However, institutional and systems changes still do not find enough knowledge and leadership for this story to have a happy ending”.

Similarly, there is almost no research on how the private sector can help advance national anti-corruption progress. For example, one senior business respondent in Saudi Arabia, pointed out how the right kind of engagement from business CEOs can lead to dramatic change. For example, as CEO of a large company, he created a safe means for major contractors to provide input to him anonymously, without fear for their personal safety, livelihood or business prospects. The result was invaluable actionable inputs, resulting in significant cost reduction and around 25% reduction of delivery time, largely due to reductions in corruption blockages. Such experiences are mentioned generically in the corporate anti-corruption research literature, but hardly ever through case studies or proper research. **Engagement by the private sector, utilizing the power they can wield, is a key facet of enabling change in a country.** These are the kinds of ‘voices from the field’ that need to be supported by good research.

What research is out there that is good?

So, what research is out there that is good? Lots of people mentioned Anticorpp, ISS, J-PAL and DFID/ACE and the Partnership for Transparency Fund (PTF). These are indeed hugely welcome, constructive programmes. But they don’t yet come close to giving us a solution set or a changed general direction.

Several people recommended articles, reports and books that provide useful-, constructive guidance. For me, the most thoughtful came from Paul Heywood, with an article on rethinking corruption that has just been published, which seeks to explain why there has been such a mismatch between research and results. Other positive

reflections include Klitgaard ([here](#) and [here](#)), [Mungiu-Pippidi](#), the Princeton programme on innovations for [successful societies](#) and J-PAL's 2013 [Governance Review Paper](#). So, something positive is happening, and this is to be welcomed.

What could we do to accelerate the usefulness of anti-corruption research?

Here are some ideas: [Getting more into the public domain](#), [researchers and practitioners take collective action](#), [rethinking corruption](#).

Getting more into the public domain

1. Researchers agree to focus 25% of each paper on thoughts about the practical usage of their work. Funders of research, and donors, also commit to this 25% element and make it a requirement of the funding.
2. Every article published in a closed-access journal should be accompanied by a short article or policy paper 2-5 pages long, which can be put in open access sources and on the academic's website, the university's website. The full journal article could then carry a link to the shorter piece, in cases people find the academic bit first and see they don't have access – then they can go to the piece that's available.
3. Practitioners agree to write 2-5 page articles on all work that they do, and place it in easy-access websites. (This has been the goal of the Corruption in Fragile States Blog – where CAASDI has posted our original theory of change, lessons learned blog posts, including how we updated our analysis, and a review of the results from our recent evaluation.)
4. Academics encourage the establishment of a new journal on addressing corruption, that encourages both practitioners and academics whilst keeping to the normal academic peer review mechanism.. There is at least one good model for such a thing: see the Stability Journal (stabilityjournal.org).

Researchers and practitioners take collective action

5. Researchers subscribe to a new organisation of academics determined to see a reduction in corruption worldwide. This is not my suggestion, but an idea currently circulating among some US academics; and a great idea. After all, is this not collective action?
6. Practitioners establish a web forum for practitioners and academics, dedicated to the practicalities of curbing corruption. It would focus especially on addressing sector-level corruption. Academics could place their research summaries here. This too is an idea currently circulating: if you are would like to contribute and/or support this, please be in touch with me: mark.pyman@icloud.com

Rethinking corruption

7. The time seems to be right for an in-depth debate about how corruption can be dis-aggregated and re-thought, especially at sector level. The purpose would be to craft better strategies and solutions.
8. Can academics, donors and others create a range of events, and piggy-back this topic onto existing conferences and seminars?

If you like these ideas, give me your vote for which ones you like the most. If you don't like any of them, give me your ideas.

This is not idle passing of the time. Individuals and societies suffer greatly from corruption, and we can be more active as researchers and practitioners in moving faster towards a more robust understanding of how we can curb it.

About the author

Dr. Mark Pyman is an experienced advocate, scholar and practitioner at the forefront of untangling the nexus between corruption and insecurity worldwide. He is currently one of three International Committee Members on the Afghanistan independent Anti-Corruption Committee. For the previous eleven years he led the global Security and Defence Programme at the NGO Transparency International. This groundbreaking programme worked on the ways that corruption undermines countries, especially in relation to security and conflict. He has led the team's field work in over 30 countries, including Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Burundi, Colombia, Georgia, India, Kenya, Latvia, Lebanon, Norway, Palestine, Poland, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, UK and the USA. His work has been instrumental in shaping the United Nations Arms Trade Treaty (2013), in influencing NATO policy and operations in respect of counter-corruption, in shaping the military doctrine of several countries, and in policy forums such as the Munich Security Conference. He has also led the development of techniques for evaluating the corruption vulnerabilities of all the world's defence companies. His last publication for TI in 2015 reviewed the 165 largest defence companies worldwide in an analysis that is viewed by the industry as the most authoritative analysis available.



He has authored or supervised some sixty publications. He has also supervised detailed reports analysing the defence corruption vulnerabilities of 120 countries.