Why fighting corruption fails in Africa

Most well-intentioned corruption-busting remedies in Africa fail because the root causes of corruption are often poorly understood, writes **William Gumede**.

Post-independence African countries inherited deeply corrupt institutions, laws and values from colonial and apartheid governments. In the majority of former African colonies, the colonial elite centralised political, economic and civic power, exclusively reserving top jobs in the public and private sector, as well as education only to fellow colonials.

At the time in the colony, the institutions that should have served as watchdogs against corruption: the judiciary, police, security services and rule of law, selectively served the interests of the elite classes. These institutions were more often at the service of the all-powerful colonial administrator or governor.

The colonial private sector for the most part, produced for export to the imperial market and as such was usually deeply dependent on the colonial government for licenses, contracts and subsidies. This sector rarely held the colonial government to account. With the exception of a few, colonial media sources were equally controlled.

COLONIAL-ERA GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS

Instead of changing colonial-era institutions, laws and values for the better, African ruling parties and leaders entrenched these deeply compromised governance systems. At independence, the colonial elite were often replaced by a similar narrow elite class. This time, however, it was the aristocracy of the independence and liberation movements: the dominant independence leader, 'struggle' families, or the dominant ethnic group or political faction.

African independence movements were often highly centralised or strongly dominated by one leader and his political, ethnic or regional faction. The dominant structural make-up of these movements has meant that they can seamlessly fit into a similar centralised political culture very much like the colonial administration.

At independence, the indigenous communities of most African countries were: relatively poor, unskilled and without any significant holdings in the private sector. Very few grassroots cadres, who formed part of the liberation movements, had professional careers outside the struggle. At post-independence, many were simply appointed to posts for which they had little aptitude, experience or skills to perform. Such a situation is fertile for corruption.

The newly acquired state bureaucracy, military, judiciary, nationalised private industries were often seen as the 'spoils' of victory and a reward for the struggle of independence. The whole process often become opaque and unaccountable with 'struggle aristocracies' dishing out patronage – jobs, government tenders, and newly nationalised private companies – to their political allies, ethnic groups or regional interests.

Giving jobs to members of the same faction, ethnic group or region meant the idea of merit-based appointments was all too often thrown out of the window. This also meant that even if the newly empowered independence movement launched economic development programmes to transform the colonial economy, such reforms were hardly ever going to have any impact, given the fact that unqualified cronies were managing key public institutions, and that scarce resources were being coarsely diverted to allies, family and friends.

Appointments to the key institutions that scrutinise as well as hold rulers to account: the judiciary, the police, the media became increasingly occupied by liberation aristocracy loyalists. These institutions already corrupt under colonialism continued to be perverted with a new set of management cadre – who were unlikely to hold the rulers, through whose patronage they serve, to account. In many countries, this continues to be so today.

Those associated with the struggle but had little or no employment, found it difficult to make a decent living in the now normalised society.

They too were forced to seek out, by corrupt means, the patronage of leaders that had control over the distribution of the 'spoils'. Almost the only jobs available in the newly independent country were in government or, the newly nationalised media, banks, schools, universities etc.

Decent employment very much depended on 'clearance' from the liberation movement leaders or the ruling group. In most cases, those critical of the dominant leaders or their policies were likely to be excluded from work in the public and private sectors.

INDIGENISATION

Very few African countries at independence had a significant private sector: those that had, more often than not saw it nationalised by the liberation or independence movement, turned government. Where significant private sectors remained, they often existed under the threat of possible nationalisation or not securing trading licenses if they failed to toe the line.

Given this, such companies were unlikely to employ anyone out of favour with the ruling elite. Partially for these reasons the private sector in many African countries is usually docile and unlikely to demand accountability from national governments. The private sector was often under constant threat of having their businesses nationalised or 'indigenised' from the new rulers.

In some instances liberation movement governments embarked on a policy of creating a 'capitalist class' or new 'indigenous' business owners, black economic empowerment or indigenisation programmes. In many such instances, political capital forms the basis of these attempts at creating indigenous capitalists. Political leaders either get stakes in newly privatised public companies, get state tenders to supply services for government, or get slices of private companies owned by former colonials, minority ethnic groups or foreign companies.

By the 1980s, under pressure
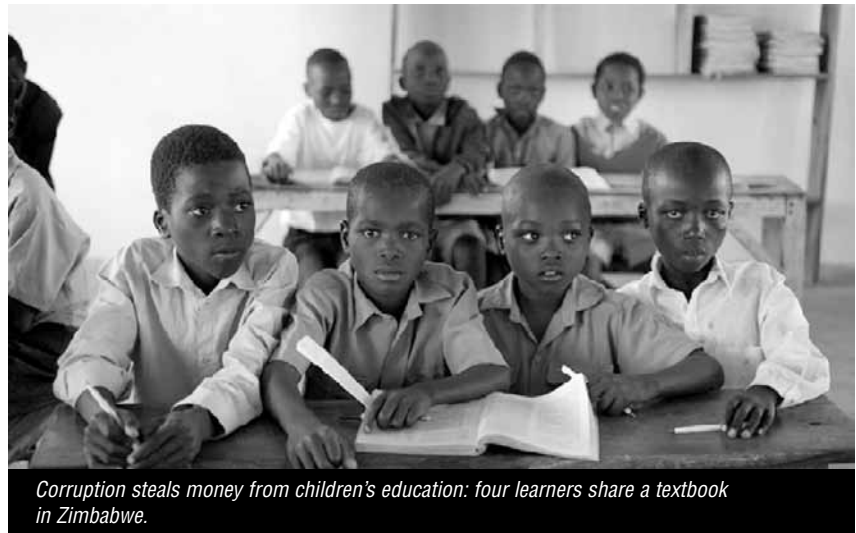
Corruption steals money from children's education: four learners share a textbook in Zimbabwe.

Robin Hammond/Sokwanele – Zimbabwe

from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Western powers through 'structural adjustment reforms', the privatisation of state-owned companies saw African independence/liberation movement governments sell off state assets to individuals that were close allies of the dominant political faction, ethnic or regional group of the independence/liberation movement government. Those who benefitted from black economic empowerment, indigenisation or privatisation programmes were the most jingoist and were not going to hold African governments to account.

BLING LIFESTYLE

Before independence, the small colonial elite often lived lives of conspicuous consumption: expensive mansions, expensive shopping trips in the capital cities of colonial empires and lavish parties. A culture of hard work was often absent. Sadly, many of the post-independence African elite – both the political and economic empowerment classes – took the colonial elite's conspicuous consumption standard as a benchmark for 'success'. Not surprisingly, some poor people also wanted to emulate this 'bling' lifestyle – and may not have seen any problem with leaders living such lives of luxury even if they themselves remained poor.

Such excessively lavish and wasteful 'bling' lifestyles enjoyed by a small elite provided fertile ground for corruption, particularly with a background of high levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment, where personal self-worth is measured by ridiculously lavish life styles. In the long-term, making significant inroads into tackling widespread poverty, unemployment and inequality – linked to a new emphasis on values – is one of the best anti-corruption measures.

During struggles for liberation and independence, progressive civil groups, whether: religious groups, non-governmental organisations, youth groups, or trade unions often joined the liberation or independence as part of anti-colonial alliance. At independence most liberation and independence movements argued that civil society – especially when they played a crucial role in ousting colonial or white-minority regimes, had now played its historic role and should be 'demobilised'.

After independence, significant independent civil groups, such as trade unions and farmers, associations, were often incorporated as 'desks' or 'leagues' of the new ruling parties. This meant that civil society groups that held the colonial governments to account and served as checks and balance mechanisms

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Corruption takes money away from services such as provision of clean water: Girls fetching water to homes 8km away in Zambia.

– and importantly had the credibility and legitimacy obtained by their sterling opposition to colonialism or apartheid – abdicated this role now at the dawn of victory, leaving corruption to flourish unrestricted.

ANTI-COLONIAL UNDERGROUND CULTURES

During independence struggles, liberation movements which fought corrupt autocratic regimes, often became corrupt, as they were forced to adapt to the unaccountable, and opaque strategies frequently employed by their oppressors. For example, while waging an armed struggle, it was not always possible for donor funding to be reconciled with receipts, or to properly supervise how money was spent during the course of underground operations. This process or lack thereof was often referred to as 'struggle accounting'. Unfortunately, when eventually installed in government such 'struggle accounting' practices continued.

Dissent was discouraged and criticism of the movements themselves, unless in highly circumscribed ways, lest they expose divisions within the movements of the oppressed. It was fear that such dissent could be exploited to brutal effect by the colonial government army, police and intelligence agencies.

By its very nature, most independence movements were secretive. They often had to act in secrecy and deception to foil the intelligence and security services of the colonial or white-minority governments. Sadly, in power, most post-independence and liberation movements turned governments also governed with obsessive secrecy: lack of openness, transparency and limitations on access to even basic information. Again, a breading ground for corruption.

Liberation and independence leaders were often put on a pedestal by supporters. This often continued after independence – and allowed leaders to get away with corruption and personalised rule, disguised by the rhetoric of ruling in 'the service of our people'.

The colonial system of legal inequality necessarily forced many among the oppressed to find ways to escape the unjust laws and rules. However, the post-colonial period has not set clear standards with respect to complying with the rule of law, and the masses have continued with such corrupt practices. In many cases liberation/independence leaders applied the law selectively, especially when it came to wrongdoing: enjoy impunity, yet ordinary citizens are subject to the law thus a climate in which corruption flourishes is created.

WEAK OPPOSITION

Weak and irrelevant opposition parties also allow corruption to flourish. In some African countries, the main opposition parties are either associated with the colonial or the minority governments, or had opposed independence– leaving them with legitimacy problems. In many instances, opposition parties were focused on ethnic constituencies.

For far too long, African ruling parties have got away with blaming the previous colonial administration – apartheid government or opposition movements (which are often associated with the ousted colonial or apartheid governments) – for their own failures. Additionally, it is common knowledge that, African ruling parties, make it difficult for opposition movements to operate: often throwing their leaders in jail, depriving them of funds and continually threating their very existence. By force or negotiation, many independence movements annex opposition parties making one large united party despite ongoing tensions.

Opposition parties that eventually come to power in Africa often offer little alternatives to existing corrupt regimes.

In most African ruling party circles, there were misguided beliefs that there were 'no victims' of corruption. Yet, corruption has a disproportioned impact on the livelihood of the poor. Corruption undermines the delivery of public services: public housing, health care, access to water and adequate sanitation, and access to reliable supplies of electricity etc.

Corruption diverts financial and other resources that could have been used for development with respect to, job creation and poverty alleviation and instead weakens the capacity of the state to deliver effective services and also equally undermines the trust ordinary people have in government.

Even the so-called 'quiet corruption' is damaging. This kind of corruption might not necessarily 'involve money changing hands, but entailed factors

such as absenteeism (for work by public officials) or the deliberate manipulating of rules for the benefit of front-line service providers, such as teachers, doctors and other government officials'. For example, a child denied adequate education because teachers did not attend classes regularly deprived children of the necessary skills needed to play a productive part in the economy once they reach adulthood. A World Bank study showed that 'big-time' corruption of senior political leaders' encouraged this sort of 'quiet corruption'.

LACK OF POLITICAL WILL

Most African ruling parties and leaders lack the political will needed to genuinely tackle corruption. Legislative gaps in dealing with corruption must be strengthened across African countries. The enforcement of internal anti-corruption controls within states must be improved. Sadly, scrutiny, enforcement and compliance in African public sectors have often been very low – creating opportunities for corruption.

The corruption fighting capacity of existing institutions must also be strengthened. Africans need independent anti-corruption structures, which could be led by agencies in the private sector or civil society. Such agencies could ensure that corrupt officials have been brought to book, as well as force police and public watchdogs to bring cases of corruption exposed in the media and by whistleblowers.

Nonetheless, these watchdogs must get the appropriate resources, required to be able to attract the best candidates and to pay them and (and in some cases protect them) appropriately. Furthermore, these institutions must be independent from the presidential office or the executive department, such as police or justice ministry, and be accountable directly to Parliament.

African ruling parties must punish the bad behaviour of its leaders and party members, legally, socially and politically as well as reward good behaviour. If this is highlighted and addressed publicly, governments can begin to restore the moral authority and credibility needed to deal with wrongdoings from ordinary citizens. This will help compel ordinary citizens to follow the rules. More importantly, political leaders must also be seen to adhere to these values. Civil society will have to play a role in 'naming and shaming, those leaders who espouse corrupt values while encouraging those who behave with integrity.

TOOTHLESS WATCHDOGS

In many African countries watchdogs, enforcement agencies and regulators are toothless, often lacking capacity and political backing. In many other cases there are huge 'legislative gaps' in anti-corruption laws. Corruption thrives if there is weak capacity in the enforcement agencies, or where there are gaps in the laws.

African governments must strengthen the fighting capacity of existing institutions dealing with corruption. In addition, enforcement and compliance in African public sectors are often very low – opening up the system for corruption.

Sometimes, excessive administrative red tape, for the most basic public services, such as getting a business license, encourages corruption. African governments should do more to make administrative processes simpler and more transparent, which will reduce the opportunities for corruption. It would be important for African countries to professionalise their public services.

Merit-based appointments to jobs in public services, regulators and enforcement agencies will come a long way to reduce the patronage system of jobs for pals, which fosters the environment for corruption. More transparent methods for appointments should be introduced, including making outcomes of decisions publicly available.

Effectively tackling African

corruption necessitates more and more transparency. According to Simon Wong, 'Open access to information provides a basis for government accountability and raises the barriers against capricious, self-serving intervention'.

The solution to tackling corruption is exposé in the media through investigative journalism to uncover wrongdoing. Whistle blowers and anti-corruption busters must be celebrated in African countries.

The continent needs an army of courageous people, to not only support honest corruption fighters, but to become corruption fighters themselves.

One innovation that could be introduced is citizens' or community forums directly corresponding to government departments that could keep a watch over corruption and service delivery in departments and monitor the progress of complaints. There have to be grassroots campaigns across Africa against corruption: the masses must know the extent of corruption, the impact of its public service delivery; and how to monitor and report it, and the importance of holding their elected leaders and public servants more vigorously accountable.

CONCLUSION

Civil society in Western countries and new emerging powers entering Africa such as China should also hold their governments and businesses to account to ensure they are not overseeing corrupt and opaque operations. Corrupt governments, businesses and individuals – from Western as well as new emerging powers must be named and shamed in order to feel the reputational effects of corruption. ◼

William Gumede is honorary associate professor, Public and Development Management, University of the Witwatersrand and author of the recently released bestselling book Restless Nation: Making Sense of Troubled Times.