Changing norms is key to fighting everyday corruption: ‘One-Step-Up’ analysis of the collated case studies from around the world

**Hong Kong – Case Study 10**

**Established Norms**

“Some get on the bus, others run alongside it, yet very few stand in front of it.” This was how the entrenched norms of corruption in Hong Kong were described. Alan Lai Lin, a former commissioner of Hong Kong’s Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), further asserted, “It would probably start with an officer finding some cash in his personal locker. Then, it was up to him. He could quietly accept it and tacitly ‘get on the bus’ of corruption. Or he could, if he refused to accept the money, mind his own business and ‘run alongside’ the bus, in which case he would become a virtual outsider and never expect to go far in his career. But worst of all was for him to ‘stand in front of the bus,’ that is, to report corruption. It was simply suicidal in job terms and an invitation for victimization” (Lai Line 2000).

**The Problem**

Illegal kickbacks, protection rackets, briberies, and other corruption-related crimes were accepted as “a way of life” in Hong Kong until the early 1970s.

The problem of corruption was epidemic in the whole government. It permeated every part of people’s lives. Scenes like ambulance men demanding “tea money” before picking up a sick person and hospital amahs asking for “tips” before giving patients a bedpan or a glass of water were commonplace. Public distrust of the Anti-Corruption Office, which was part of the police, was deep-rooted (LaMagna 1999).

**Objectives/Strategies for Action**

When the government decided to set up an independent body to tackle corruption, the then governor openly declared that lasting success would require nothing short of a “quiet revolution in the society.” He knew too well that law enforcement action alone, no matter how effective, would not be able to stamp out corruption in the long term (LaMagna 1999).

ICAC was thus established with the statutory duties to educate the public about the evils of corruption and to enlist and foster public support in the battle. Community education was to be an integral part of the antigraft strategy, alongside detection and prevention.

**Tools and Techniques Used**

Many resources were deployed to win over an incredulous public, to assure them that ICAC was effective, impartial, and determined to remove the “rotten apples.” In order to allay public fears of possible retaliation, a stringent “sacred rule of silence” was instituted from the outset on the origins of corruption complaints under investigation.

Knowing that public support could dissipate at the slightest hint of inertia or inefficiency, ICAC commissioned regular surveys to gauge the public mood, assessing—

- Level of tolerance of corruption
- Tolerance of private sector corruption
- Willingness to report
- Public support

Corruption was simultaneously tackled on three fronts:

- Investigation
- Prevention
- Public education

These three functions were structured to be interdependent, each building on the strengths of the other.

To demonstrate to the public that the corrupt would be brought to justice regardless of who they
were, ICAC determined to act without fear or favor. ICAC took decisive enforcement actions to restore public trust. A series of high-profile arrests and prosecutions occurred, with police syndicated corruption on top of the list. The “big tiger” corrupt senior government officials were described in the mass media, convincing the public that the anti-corruption drive was serious.

Corruption prevention and community relations also moved into top gear. Prevention specialists examined the procedures and practices of all government departments, plugging loopholes and removing corruption opportunities along the way. An average of 100 studies a year were conducted on various government procedures and practices. In view of the growing demand, an Advisory Services Group was also established to provide tailor-made confidential advice to the private sector.

Understanding that “the cancerous cells of corruption may be dormant, but they are waiting to strike again,” the Community Relations Department (CRD) undertook the task of transforming the public attitude toward corruption. The CRD’s responsibilities included the following:

- Promoting the image of ICAC as an independent and determined anticorruption agency
- Educating the public on the anticorruption law
- Enlisting public support in reporting corruption
- Instilling and fostering a culture of integrity and fairness in order to ostracize the corrupt

Public education was carried forward through—

- Face-to-face contacts with all walks of life in the community to hammer home the evils of corruption and enlist support
- Extensive use of the mass media in illustrating the dire consequences of corruption and inculcating positive values in society

In an average year, CRD staff reached between 200,000 and 300,000 people through approximately 800 talks, activities, and special projects. CRD staff talked to every corner of society. Be it a civil servant, a taxi driver, a housewife, a teacher, a construction worker, or a successful businessman, everyone was a target. The CRD produced “practical guides,” newsletters, and other publications for government employees, trade unions, and other specific target groups on how to deal with tempting situations. An Ethics Development Center was established to promote ethical business practices, which were endorsed by major chambers of commerce in the country.

A Press Information Office was set up to provide the mass media with timely information on ICAC’s anticorruption initiatives. Television was also used extensively. TV advertisements and drama series based on real-life corruption cases were aired. The mass media strategy was divided into four phases:

- **The Era of Awakening:** A promotion campaign in the early 1970s was directed primarily at low-income people, such as hawkers or manual laborers, who were most vulnerable to abuses. Their sufferings were highlighted and they were urged to report their stories. The catch phrase of the campaign was “Report corruption.”

- **Level Playing Field:** In the economic boom of the 1980s, the message targeted private sector corruption. The message was that a level playing field for all investors was central to the continued economic well-being of the country. TV commercials were designed with a subtle tone, since the target audience was relatively refined and educated.

- **1997 Syndrome:** When Hong Kong rejoined mainland China, there were worries that the unscrupulous would scramble for money by illegal means before migrating to other countries. To counter this perception, ICAC set out to assure the public that it was as determined as ever to fight corruption. It put out a slogan: “Hong Kong’s Advantage Is ICAC.”
• **New Millennium**: Realizing that the digital age belongs to the youth, who were brought up without experiencing the ruinous consequences of unchecked corruption, ICAC reintroduced integrity education with youth as a target audience, using online channels. ICAC’s youth website, “Teensland,” scored more than one million hits within less than six months of its launch.

### Outcome/Impact of the Interventions

The changes in public perception of corruption can be tracked by the following indicators:

- The percentage of nonanonymous corruption reports (a good indicator of public confidence) rose from 35 percent in 1974 to 56 percent in 1980s and has remained steady at about 68 percent in the past few years.
- The percentage of reports alleging government corruption dropped drastically, from 86 percent in 1974 to 60 percent in 1984 and 40 percent in 1999. Reports of police corruption plunged from 45 percent in 1974 to 30 percent in 1984 and to 14 percent in 1999. Most important, police corruption nowadays concerns only individual officers. Syndicated corruption is a thing of the past.
- In 1993, 36.7 percent of survey respondents said they would not tolerate corruption in both the private and public sector. The level rose to about 80 percent in the late 1990s and stood at 83 percent in 2000.
- In 1993, 44.6 percent of respondents expressed tolerance of private sector graft. This level dipped to 11 percent in 2000.
- The percentage of respondents indicating “willingness to report” corruption gradually rose from 54.4 percent in 1993 to 64.7 percent in 2000.
- Public endorsement of ICAC persistently hovers between 98 and 99 percent.

Effective enforcement can be tracked from the following outcomes:

- In the year of ICAC’s inception, a police chief superintendent who had fled Hong Kong while under investigation by the police Anticorruption Office was located and extradited from the United Kingdom by ICAC. He was put behind bars for four years on charges of pocketing millions in “black money” during his tenure.
- Between 1974 and 1977, approximately 260 police officers of all ranks were prosecuted—four times the total number prosecuted preceding ICAC. In a single scoop, ICAC rounded up 140 police officers from three police districts. At one time, more than 200 were detained for alleged corruption.
- In ICAC’s first year of operation, 3,189 reports of alleged corruption were filed, more than twice the number received by the police Anti-corruption Office the previous year.
- Within three years of actions, ICAC pronounced that corruption syndicates within the civil service had been all but crushed.
- ICAC claims to have forged one of the most extensive community networks in Hong Kong. ICAC claims that its efforts have turned Hong Kong from one of the most corrupt to one of the most upstanding societies in the world. According to an ICAC report, social disapproval of graft is so overpowering today that those convicted of corruption carry a lifelong stigma.

### Lessons Learned

- Tackling corruption requires simultaneous efforts on three fronts—investigation, prevention, and public education.
- With full commitment, support, and well-thought-out strategies, a government anti-corruption agency can be the most effective instrument to fight corruption.
- An elaborate system of checks and balances is
important to ensure the integrity and credibility of a government-led anticorruption agency. All aspects of ICAC’s work are subject to the scrutiny and monitoring of civilian advisory committees appointed by the chief executive.

• Adequate legal power should be bestowed on anticorruption agencies to avoid secrecy and manipulation by powerful vested interests. An independent judiciary is just as important.
• A high level of staff integrity is necessary to make anticorruption agencies effective. ICAC claims to have very stringent staff recruitment criteria. It also has an internal monitoring unit.
• Garnering support from the mass media was a great help in exposing corruption and the effective work done by ICAC to counter it.

• Public trust in a government-run anticorruption agency hinges on its ability to remain effective and impartial in the execution of its duties.

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Sources