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Quiet Corruption: Anti-Corruption's Trojan Horse

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This letter explored current trends of corruption that has quietly emerged in developing Ghana.

Abstract

Globally, the concept of corruption has taken different shades over the years. Due to this trend, many forms of corrupt acts have silently been perpetuated in Ghana. This paper seeks to provide insights into 'quiet corruption' and how it affects development and standards of living. It also suggests some measures to combat this menace.

Keywords: Anti-Corruption's Trojan Horse, Ghana, quiet corruption.

Troy had consistently repelled Greek attacks in the war between both states. Greek mighty men – Agamemnon, Menelaus, Achilles, Ajax and Odeysseus – had tried variously, at the peril of Troy had consistently repelled Greek attacks in the war between both states. Greek mighty men – Agamemnon, Menelaus, Achilles, Ajax and Odeysseus – had tried variously, at the peril of their lives to defeat Troy but failed. The Trojans always woke to the presence of the huge Greek army and navy at their gates and their shores. One day they woke up and the huge Greek army and navy was gone. In their place stood a wooden horse. With an eye out for the Greek army, the Trojans dragged the horse into their city. That wooden horse became their undoing. They eventually succumbed to the Greek army.

Introduction

Corruption – Political, Grand and Petty corruption – has been variously defined and has taken the centre-stage of the fight against corruption. Attention is focused on acts like bribery, nepotism, fraud, embezzlement, conflict of interest etc. Numerous legislation and strategies including demand-side auditing have instituted to check these acts of corruption. In 1995 Transparency International launched the first Corruption Perception Index (CPI) to measure

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“...countries on how corrupt their public sectors are seen to be ... [and to] ...send[s] a powerful message and governments... forced to take notice and act”. Traditionally therefore, Corruption has been viewed as the preserve of the public sector. Also, this notion about corruption is reflected in the thinking that corruption involved relationships between government or public agencies and private agents (Ndikumana, 2013).

More recently, however, this view of corruption has shifted. The private sector is seen as a key player in acts of corruption, either in private-to-private relations or private-to-government relations. Some have defined corruption as the “... exchange mechanism where wealth gravitates towards power in return for preferential treatment” (Ekwueme, 2014). This definition accounts for both supply and demand sides of corruption. It sets in frame corruption between and among individuals in the private sector and public sector, and makes corruption a market-like activity driven by the supply and demand of preferential treatment. Corruption is also characterized as a “deals-based way to sustain agreements among certain individuals or groups” (World Bank Group, 2017, p.77). Acts of corruption popular with the private sector include tax evasion, transfer mispricing, illicit financial flows etc.

These very visible types and forms of corruption have a huge cost for the world, Africa and Ghana in particular. The costs of corruption are both fiscal and structural. Corruption has cost Africa and the world a lot in terms of infrastructure. Popularly, the cost of corruption is evident in the poor health facilities accessed by citizens, poor roads and poor or non-existent public housing in many states in Africa. Corruption also leads to weakened institutions and poor governance. It undermines the institutions’ legitimacy because it affects citizens’ perceptions of fairness (World Bank Group, 2017). Generally, corruption presents a security problem to the state. For the youth, the effect of corruption is manifest in the burgeoning youth unemployment rates, and poor public service provision that does not promote the creation of the structures needed to allow the youth to experiment and grow their entrepreneurial abilities. Fiscally, the very visible forms of corruption are argued by Kreutner (2016) to cost about 5% of global GDP and hits the poor and vulnerable the hardest. It is contended that corruption and HIV/AIDs are the two major killers in Africa, with corruption costing the continent about US\$300 billion annually (Lumumba, 2014).

Quiet Corruption

Silencers muffle the sound of guns or machines, creating the appearance of non-activity whilst the machine is in motion, generating its output and heat. This is same with quiet corruption. Quiet corruption is largely unseen, hardly heard of, but wreaks havoc just as the other forms of corruption that is visible. The World Bank uses the analogy of an iceberg to explain the phenomenon of Quiet Corruption. The easily visible part of an iceberg is the smallest part. The bigger part of the iceberg remains buried within the sea. The Bank stresses that the easily visible forms of corruption – grand and petty corruption – are only a “tip of the iceberg”. There exist other forms of corruption that remain unseen, untracked and universal (World Bank, 2010a).

Quiet corruption refers to those forms of corruption that fall below Grand Corruption, Petty Corruption [mainly low-level bribery] and Political Corruption. The World Bank defines Quiet Corruption as consisting “various types of malpractice of frontline providers [teachers, doctors, inspectors, and other government officials at the front lines of service provision] that do not involve monetary exchange” (World Bank, 2010a: 2). To the Bank, quiet corruption becomes manifest when services and inputs already paid for by the taxpayer through the government is not delivered.

The following characterize Quiet corruption;

- Observable and non-observable behaviours that lead to poor service delivery – The observable behaviours include absenteeism, moonlighting, theft of inputs etc. The non-observable behaviours include attitudinal problems such as clockwatching, laziness, deliberate lower levels of exertion and bending of laid down rules to suit oneself.
- Low visibility – Quiet corruption often manifests as personal and attitudinal problems and therefore are not easily visible. It does not manifest in the sudden or dramatic forms and so goes under the radar of public scrutiny.
- Ubiquitous – Quiet Corruption pervades every sector of work life. That it manifests often as an attitudinal problem makes it difficult to flag and deal with, thus allowing it the freedom to germinate and grow.

- Has long-term negative effects – Quiet corruption often exposes the poor and vulnerable in society to risk. This is because they are often the people who interact directly with frontline service providers in government service. It also affects a nation’s ability to prosper by promoting behaviour that come at a cost to business. When calculated in monetary terms, states and businesses lose billions of dollars yearly due to acts of quiet corruption such as lateness and absenteeism. Quiet corruption also leads to poor human resource quality via its impact on education. Quality education outcomes are affected when teachers report late or absent themselves from school because they are often unsupervised.

Quiet Corruption in Ghana

Quiet Corruption plays out in Ghana as well as petty or grand corruption. Some of the major quiet corruption issues in Ghana are lateness and absenteeism.

Lateness

Generally, lateness occurs when a person arrives at a place or event later than the stipulated time of arrival. Employee lateness therefore refers to a situation when a staff of an organisation arrives at work later than the stipulated reporting time. Studies show that lateness has economic and psychological effects on output, quality and quantity of service and ultimately productivity, and costs US businesses about \$3billion yearly (Kasu, 2014). Burton (2014) asserts that apart from insulting others, lateness undermines one’s personality and maybe a message from one’s intuition that one does not actually want to be at a place. Employee lateness is caused by factors including low morale, arrogance, emergencies, and minor issues like traffic jams or other transport-related issues (Kasu, 2014).

Subjective evidence points to public servants as the worst culprits of employee lateness. They are reputed to report to work late and close earlier than advertised, without offering “meaningful” service. Even though there has been little scientific study on the cost of lateness to Ghana, in monetary terms, it was estimated in 2004 that Ghana lost 50 billion Cedis [currently GHS 5 million] a month through lateness and absenteeism (Coomson, 2004). There has been very little scientific study on the cost of lateness to Ghana in monetary terms. It is however, a widely held view that “One of the main reasons for the continuing underdevelopment of our country is our nonchalant attitude to time...” (Bayor, 2016).

There have been many attempts to deal with lateness in Ghana. In the public sector, some drastic yet fractional efforts are made by leadership to ensure that staff avoid being late. For example, in January 2018 the Minister of Railways Development asked 14 workers who reported late to work to go back home, and no further action was taken against the 14 (Modern Ghana, 2018). In the private sector, employers have turned to time registers and digital sign-in applications to monitor and check employee lateness. Repeat lateness is swiftly punished with either loss of a workday, deductions from wages and sometimes dismissal.

Absenteeism

Absenteeism refers to the failure of an employee to turn up for work as scheduled (Kasu, 2014). There exist three kinds of absenteeism; White, Grey and Black absenteeism. Black absenteeism is where a worker deliberately reports himself sick and stays away from work. Absenteeism is projected to amount to about 15 % of payroll cost of staff who work with them. Employee absenteeism is caused mainly by low employee commitment, personal characteristics such as gender, number of children one has and occupational characteristics such as one’s position and salary levels.

A World Bank report in 2010 on education in Ghana revealed that Ghana’s education sector was massively undermined by absenteeism. The report stated that absenteeism was more common in rural schools, and had links with poor work environment and poor teacher morale. It was found that a Ghanaian teacher was likely to miss 43 days of school a year as compared to 11 and 13 days by colleagues in Tunisia and Morocco respectively. Students actually engaged in 76 days of learning as against the 197 school days in a year. This was ascribed to teacher absenteeism and poor time-on-task (World Bank, 2010b). Apart from poor work environment and poor morale, absenteeism in the education sector was fuelled by a lack of supervision and a lack of basic sanitation amenities at

the schools. A “Zero Tolerance for Absenteeism” Policy launched in 2012 reduced teacher absenteeism from 27 % to 7 % in 2016.

Combating Quiet Corruption

Quiet corruption is just as harmful as petty and grand corruption. Quiet corruption creates and sustains an environment of conducive for petty and grand corruption. It also exposes the poor and vulnerable in society to risk since they depend a lot on the provision of services by the state. Again, it affects a nation’s ability to prosper. Thus, it is of utmost importance to tackle quiet corruption just as petty and grand corruption are tackled. This paper suggests some ways of dealing with quiet corruption as follows;

1. Publicizing the canker. Attention must be paid to quiet corruption just as is paid to petty and grand corruption. One of the attributes sustaining quiet corruption is low visibility. To deal effectively with it, states and Civil Society groups must begin to focus attention on quiet corruption. In Ghana, we must begin to speak against lateness, absenteeism, poor customer service and the theft of inputs. The larger society must be sensitized on the cost of quiet corruption. This would ensure that citizens are empowered enough to deal with the canker.

2. Adopt results-based approaches to incentives. A good way of fighting quiet corruption is to change the incentive structure by adopting results-based approaches. In some private sector enterprises run by Indians, salary and other incentives are paid based on the production of targeted outputs including attendance and hours spent at the shop floor. In most government agencies, staff know that their salaries and incentives are guaranteed and so may not work to justify the salaries. The lack of a results-based approach to incentivizing staff of government agencies is propping up quiet corruption. Changing the incentive structure is one of the key ways of dealing with quiet corruption.

3. Citizens and civil society must adopt social accountability approaches to hold service providers accountable. Approaches such as the Community Scorecard and Community Report Card will be helpful in this regard. These cards allow community members to grade the services they receive from providers. Feedback from the process is given to the service providers. This will help leaders identify areas where poor service is being encountered and work at them.

Conclusion

Quiet Corruption is a ubiquitous yet unseen and ignored type of corruption. It is costly especially to poor and vulnerable people. Opportunities exist for states and civil society to tackle this act of corruption. They need to ensure that sustained attention is given to quiet corruption as much as is given to petty and grand corruption. It should also be noted that the fight against corruption will not be won except when states and civil society collaborate. With effective collaborations, quiet corruption will be unmasked and tackled to ensure holistic development.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no financial conflicts of interest.

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