



# Mobilizing civil society to fight corruption in Bangladesh

*Civil society organizations—such as the Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International—can play a crucial role in articulating public concerns and identifying ways to reduce corruption. Anticorruption strategies should nurture such organizations.*

A successful anticorruption strategy must have a free press to voice public opinion and report cases of corruption, an effective and politically neutral mechanism to investigate and prosecute corruption, and a reliable judicial process to punish wrongdoing when it is proved. It is rare to find all these elements in a developing country. Without considerable public pressure, governments are unlikely to foster the transparency and accountability needed to curb malfeasance by public officials. Consequently, there is a major role for civil society organizations to campaign for such reforms. This is the mission of the national chapters of Transparency International.

Transparency International, headquartered in Berlin, is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to fighting corruption around the world. Bangladesh's national chapter has consistently brought corrupt public institutions to the public's attention and identified anticorruption measures that could easily be implemented by a willing government. Such efforts mitigate the public's sense of powerlessness about and passive acceptance of official wrongdoing.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has acknowledged corruption as an ongoing problem—not just one inherited from her predecessors—and recently announced the creation of a reformed Anti-corruption Bureau. In addition, the prime minister is committed to appointing an

ombudsman who will play a major role in the government's anticorruption efforts. These are just first steps, however. The Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International has a crucial role to play in pressing for these reforms to be implemented, publicizing well-researched facts about corruption, and lobbying for additional measures.

## Transparency International's emergence in Bangladesh

In 1994 a group of concerned Bangladeshis decided to organize a local chapter of Transparency International. Over the next two years this group established a core membership of respected citizens, registered as a trust, appointed as its executive secretary a capable lawyer with human rights experience, and opened a small office. Funding initially came from private subscriptions. These were later supplemented by modest grants from donors—notably Denmark and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

In its early days the chapter encountered widespread cynicism about its ability to influence corruption. But this situation changed in 1997 after the chapter published *Survey on Corruption in Bangladesh*, which attracted considerable media attention. The survey, funded by the Asia Foundation and sponsored by the national chapter, was carried out by a local survey organization.

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Survey findings  
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The survey gave the Bangladesh chapter new momentum, providing hard facts and public recognition that enabled the group's leaders to make formal presentations to the country's president, prime minister, speaker, attorney-general, and senior political leaders on the need for determined government action to deal with corruption. The chapter used information from the survey as the basis for a major workshop on mobilizing civil society, held in July 1998. The press has since held several roundtable discussions that have encouraged prominent citizens to call for government action.

The Bangladesh chapter has steadily gained membership support and expanded its activities. It publishes a newsletter that reports recent cases of corruption, disseminates information on best practice in other countries, and advocates specific measures and reforms. In 1998, with funding from the World Bank and technical assistance from Transparency International, the chapter held a two-day corporate planning exercise so that a cross-section of civil society could help clarify its objectives and prepare a long-term work program. Since then the chapter has launched, also with World Bank support, a series of diagnostic studies to be undertaken by independent researchers with considerable insider knowledge. These surveys are intended to lay bare corruption in a number of public bodies—including the Roads and Highways Department, Customs Department, public utilities, and nationalized commercial banks.

### The importance of hard data

Allegations of corruption abound in Bangladesh. Everyone seems to know about corruption, often from hearsay or personal experience. But solid documentation is hard to find. Surveys, if credibly undertaken, are invaluable in providing answers to such questions as, "Did you have to bribe an official to get your driver's license, land title, or passport?" Faced with such data, it is much harder for officials to contend that allegations of corruption are baseless. Moreover, such surveys have a strong impact on public opinion.

The Bangladesh chapter's survey revealed that 63 percent of households involved in court cases had bribed court officials. Moreover, 19 percent of witnesses were hired to appear. Some 89 percent of respondents believed that it was almost impossible to get quick and fair judicial judgments without money or influence. Such findings outraged lower-court judges. But their protests were dismissed by the media, which—supported by eminent citizens—called for urgent reform.

The survey findings provided a strong impetus and wide public support for a project to reform the judiciary. Moreover, in recent months the High Court has become much bolder, dealing with unusual decisiveness with large loan defaulters who hold bank directorships and rebuking the prime minister for accusing judges of bias in granting bail petitions to members of the opposition party. The national chapter plans follow-up household surveys so that it can track trends.

The diagnostic studies now under way will add even more bite to the campaign to persuade the government to deal firmly and transparently with corruption in government agencies. These studies will not address individual cases, because doing so would expose the chapter to the risk of retaliation by powerful people, including possibly costly court cases. But the results will undoubtedly resonate with members of the public who are exposed to extortion by officials.

In this way the studies will spotlight malfeasance and attract attention that those responsible would prefer to avoid. Detailed exposure of corrupt mechanisms will help in designing reforms. It will also reveal systemic problems, pinpointing the need to reform core government processes to increase transparency and accountability.

The Bangladesh chapter plans to use the diagnostic studies and the trends from household surveys in workshops organized with the Public Administration Reforms Commission and various civil society groups. The hard data will help drive the public debate on the need for reform.

## Building public pressure for reform

The Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International also recognizes that it needs to help organize lobbies around the country. Its long-term plan is to have a presence in every parliamentary constituency. As a start it has begun setting up committees of concerned citizens. These committees are seen as self-sustaining groups that, with the support of the national chapter's central organization, will campaign locally against corruption. The committees may also prepare regular "report cards" for local government agencies, and lobby for better local services. Thus reducing corruption will be just one part of a larger set of concerns of interest to local populations.

Linked to the committees of concerned citizens is a plan to establish advice and information centers that will coordinate the replication of the corruption surveys, working in conjunction with the national chapter's Documentation Center. Together the citizen committees and advice and information centers will disseminate information to the public through newsletters, reports, research papers, seminars, and press activities. In addition, the national chapter will foster competition among the centers and the committees in the preparation of report cards. The chapter's website (<http://www.ti-bangladesh.org>) includes material from Bangladesh as well as the rest of South Asia, because the chapter is acting as the secretariat for all Transparency International chapters in the region.

The Bangladesh chapter rightly attaches considerable importance to winning over the minds of the young. Young people need to learn to see corruption not as an inescapable fact of life, but rather as a social cancer that threatens their future and must be challenged at every opportunity. The chapter, in conjunction with a national newspaper, has sponsored an essay competition for schoolchildren on corruption. In the future the chapter will campaign for a basic course in civic ethics to be taught in all schools. Finally, the chapter is exploring with a private television channel, soon to be launched, the possibility of airing docu-

mentaries to increase citizen awareness of public accountability issues.

## Forging partnerships to fight corruption

The Bangladesh chapter recognizes that a key to its effectiveness will be its ability to create a strong civil society coalition committed to fighting corruption. This coalition should include private research institutes, members of the press, NGOs interested in human rights and environmental issues, private development organizations active at the village and district levels, and groups of professional and business organizations.

The national chapter's dialogue with the business community mainly occurs through chambers of commerce and industry. The aim has been to encourage the chambers to send a clear message to their members on the importance of adhering to honest business practices in order to gain the respect and trust of the community and to lower the cost of doing business. The business community can identify situations in which its members encounter corruption and develop joint programs to combat it.

One area of cooperation still to be explored is with groups of local professionals such as lawyers and accountants. Working with trade unions will be another challenge, to convince workers that they would benefit from a less corrupt society and encourage them to tackle their leaders' collusion with corrupt officials in public agencies.

The Bangladesh chapter is already collaborating with the press. To make this relationship more effective, the chapter plans to help train journalists in investigative reporting. In addition, the chapter has tried to engage editors in discussions on ways to enhance the role of the press as a watchdog on corruption. The chapter recently awarded prizes to journalists for high-quality investigative journalism; it is intended that these prizes will be awarded each year.

## Advocating actions to reduce corruption

The Bangladesh chapter understands that mere exhortation is useless in achieving

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change. Building public opinion through data collection, press campaigns, and a powerful civil society coalition is important. But it is also essential to identify credible measures to reduce corruption. The public must be convinced that there are practical actions that would reduce corruption.

The national chapter has highlighted a number of possible measures, including:

- Repealing the Official Secrets Act.
- Requiring ministers and members of Parliament to publicly declare their assets every year.
- Appointing an ombudsman.
- Implementing a freedom of information act.
- Making public the deliberations of Parliament's Public Accounts Committee.
- Creating an independent television and radio broadcasting authority.
- Separating the judiciary from the executive.
- Having the Anticorruption Bureau report directly and publicly to Parliament (rather than secretly to the prime minister).

### Linking civil society and Parliament

Ultimately Parliament must hold the government accountable for its performance. In turn, Parliament is held accountable by voters. Thus the link between civil society and anticorruption efforts should occur above all through Parliament.

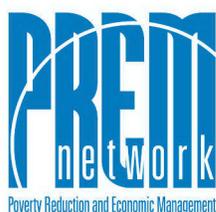
This link is extremely weak in Bangladesh. This weakness underscores the importance of civil society efforts being attached, on the one hand, to parliamentary reform and, on the other, to committees of concerned citi-

zens, NGOs, and other civil society organizations that are active at the constituency level. Recently the Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International, the Parliamentary Centre of Canada, and the World Bank Institute brought together parliamentarians and civil society representatives from across South Asia for a seminar called "Parliament and Good Governance: Towards a New Agenda for Strengthening Accountability in South Asia." The seminar generated specific recommendations on measures to strengthen parliaments, judiciaries, and civil society organizations, reform electoral systems and political parties, establish more effective anti-corruption agencies and watchdog bodies, and make donors and international financial institutions more accountable. Crystallizing political will is considered both a bottom-up and top-down process.

Changing attitudes and behavior takes time. The Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International cannot yet claim any measurable success in reducing corruption. It is still a young organization—one with limited resources that is dependent on grants from foreign donors. Critics question its ultimate effectiveness and the motives of those involved. But without question, the chapter has helped place corruption more firmly on the public agenda. That in itself is an important achievement.

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*If you are interested in similar topics, consider joining the Anticorruption Thematic Group. Contact John Heilbrunn, x87754, or click on Thematic Groups on PREMnet.*



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