

RETHINKING CORRUPTION REFORM

STRATEGY, SCALE AND SUBSTANCE

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ABSTRACT

In a recent paper on rethinking corruption, Heywood (2017, 47) concluded that, without greater analytic sophistication and depth, 'it will remain difficult to develop interventions that have an impact on the lived reality of specific instances of actual corrupt practices, as opposed to generic observations about which places are more corrupt than others.' In this paper we move from rethinking corruption to 'rethinking corruption reform'. We start by challenging the current infantilisation of the word 'strategy' through an analysis of how good strategy is defined, taught and formulated in the domains of the military, business and politics. This brings us to new conclusions about how those seeking to reduce corruption can conceive and execute better, more effective reform strategies.

We examine the different scales at which anti-corruption initiatives take place, distinguishing three levels where the challenge, and therefore the type of strategy, will differ: international, national and tactical scale change. Whilst national scale change has received the most attention, the vast majority of reform initiatives fall into the tactical scale category. The reform might be geographical, such as within a province, municipality or a city; sectoral, such as in the healthcare, power, or construction sectors; or simply reform-minded groups needing to reduce corruption in their specific spheres of responsibility.

We then explore how reformers can better develop the substance of their strategy. We think of this as being the core content of the strategy – the insight or diagnosis involved that allows choices to be made and options discarded – as distinct from the process to be followed in developing a strategy or the other components of formal strategy such as governance, management, coordination or reporting. We consider the substance of a strategy to comprise three distinct but interlinked activities: making an insightful diagnosis, clarifying and reformulating the purpose and the objectives, then formulating an actionable reform approach that guides the reformers, including choosing which specific reform measures will be preferred. We give examples from reform experience of each of the activities.

Throughout, we base our understanding about strategy formulation on three pillars: knowledge from other domains (military, business, politics); insights from the research literature on corruption and corruption reform; and personal experience of corruption reform in a wide range of countries and sectors.





Over the course of the last fifty years, as the subject of corruption has moved from being at the political and economic margins to becoming a mainstream issue, reform efforts have proliferated. From global multilateral reforms like the establishment of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the EU corruption-monitoring process GRECO (Group of States Against Corruption) and the Open Government Partnership (OGP), to corruption reform in local services by NGOs and municipalities, the scale ranges from the global to the local.

The patchy and generally unsatisfactory impact of these efforts has come in for increasing scrutiny. In a recent paper by one of the current authors, Heywood (2017, 21) analyses the ‘apparent mismatch between the attention focused on corruption and our collective capacity to make a practical difference’. He identifies three main reasons for the discrepancy: the way that corruption has been conceptualised, the tendency to concentrate on the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis, and the lack of disaggregation of the different types of corruption in an increasingly transnational world.

In this paper we develop these arguments further, rethinking how committed change leaders conceive, develop and implement their reform strategies. How does one conceive a reform strategy? What choices are available, or could be considered, when conceiving the reform strategy? What does it mean to think strategically about corruption reform? Can such thinking be framed or steered in a way that learns usefully from the experience of other reformers?

Two features are immediately obvious when reflecting on strategy and strategic thinking. First, rather like the term ‘corruption’, the word ‘strategy’ has become overused to the point where it has little real meaning; instead, it is used as a choice phrase to insert as required, along with ‘stakeholder consultation’, ‘evidence-based’ and the like. Indeed, a highly cited paper by one of the preeminent academics in the field is titled ‘The lost meaning of strategy’ (Strachan 2005). Second, conversely, strategic thinking is a real mode of thought, highly prized in the military and in business, and it has been the subject of deep examination in both domains in the past two decades.

Our objective in this paper is to reclaim strategy as an essential part of every corruption reform effort, that can assist change leaders in thinking through what options they have, or could have, for achieving their reforms. We develop the paper as follows: in the next section, we provide an overview of what the basics of strategy and strategic thinking mean. We then turn to the importance of identifying different scales of strategy. The following section explores what constitutes the substance of reform strategy, with examples of how these insights are applied to corruption reform measures. The final section concludes.

INTRO- DUCTION



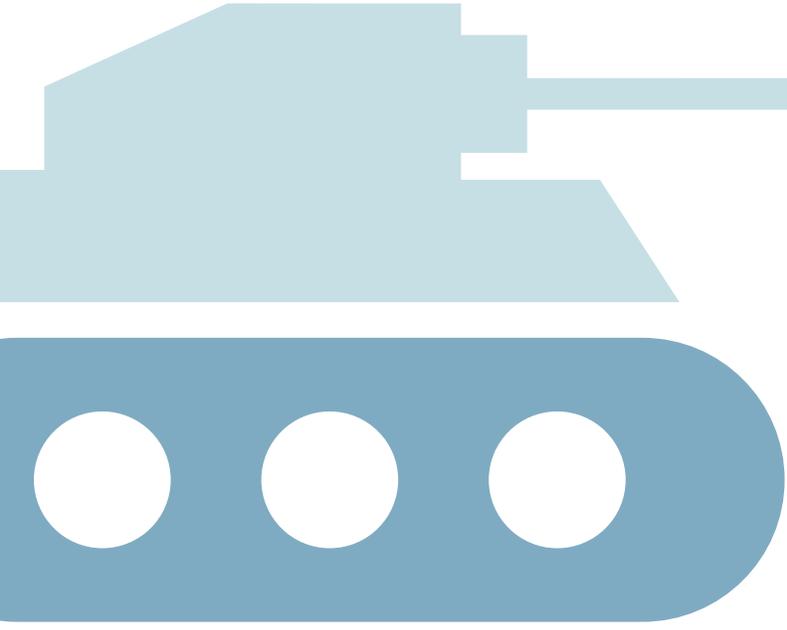
STRATEGY – RECOVERING ITS MEANING

In his award-winning history of strategy, Freedman (2013, ix and xi) provides this description of the real meaning of the word:

Despite the problems of finding ways through the uncertainty and confusion of human affairs, a strategic approach is still considered to be preferable to one that is merely tactical, let alone random. [Yet...] there is no agreed-upon definition of strategy that describes the field and limits its boundaries. By and large, strategy comes into play where there is actual or potential conflict, when interests collide, and forms of resolution are required. This is why a strategy is much more than a plan. A plan supposes a sequence of events that allows one to move with confidence from one state of affairs to another. Strategy is required when others might frustrate one's plans because they have different and possibly opposing interests and concerns.

Freedman's overview may seem simple, but it clarifies much. First, strategy means an approach that is more than planning. Plans are necessary in all sorts of endeavours and indeed are essential mechanisms for carrying out strategies, but they are not of themselves strategies. Strategy means there is some insight or diagnosis involved that allows choices to be made and options discarded. It implies somehow taking the whole into account, seeing the wood for the trees, addressing causes rather than symptoms. The strategy incorporates insights that can help one find ways through the uncertainty and confusion of human affairs. Core to strategic thinking is a consideration of how others will react.

Freedman's framing is also explicit that strategy is connected with actual or potential conflict, a framing that is consistent with strategic thinking being an evolutionary capability. Official anti-corruption strategies often fall down on this point: formal documents with strategy in the title usually have all reference to conflict removed, repackaging strategy as the approved view of the organisation.



Military Usage

The earliest historical written references to ‘strategy’ were military, dating back at least to Athenian times in the fifth century BC. Warfare was beginning to be seen as too complicated to leave to the heroic deeds of individual warriors and the ten members of the Athenian War Council, who were expected to lead from the front, were referred to as *strategoí*. In this respect the origins of the word lie with the art of generalship (Freedman 2013, 30). The Greek word *strategiá* was in use in Constantinople in the 9th century by the Byzantine Emperor Leo VI. The idea of strategy in Europe was in turn a product of ‘the growth of standing, professional armies on the one hand and of the Enlightenment on the other’ (Strachan 2005, 35). The term came into common European military use in the eighteenth century, initially in France in the 1770s, meaning ‘the art of the commander to wield and employ appropriately and with adroitness all the means of the general in his hand, to move all the parts that are subordinate to him and to apply them successfully.’ (Freedman 2013, 72). The subject received increasing attention after the Napoleonic wars, when the distinction between tactics and strategy was developed as the size of armies tripled after conscription was introduced (Strachan 2005, 35) and on through the nineteenth century, most notably in the writings of Carl von Clausewitz for whom the purpose of all strategy was to achieve the political goal that the state was seeking to accomplish. He defined strategy simply as ‘the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war’ (Clausewitz 2007, [1832] pp.128, 177, 227). This perspective has held sway into more recent times: military strategist B. H. Liddell Hart, for example, defines strategy as ‘the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy’ (Liddell Hart 1967, 321).

The military themselves pay great attention to education and training about strategy. The US Joint Doctrine on Strategy (2019, I-1), for example, describes strategy as follows:

‘The objective of strategy, in the modern sense, is to serve policy—the positions of governments and others cooperating, competing, or waging war in a complex environment. [...] In its simplest expression, strategy determines what needs to be accomplished, the methods to accomplish it, and the resources required by those methods.’

¹Extensively observed in studies of chimpanzees but also in other species such as birds, it involves coalition formation, the use of deception, graduated escalation and the calibrated use of violence; see Morton (2000).

Among NATO nations, doctrine – itself a term subject to debate (see Strachan 2005, 44, 46) – is kept fairly tightly aligned between allies, so this US approach is closely reflected in the doctrinal texts of the other NATO allies and indeed NATO itself. Whilst keeping the term ‘strategy’ and ‘grand strategy’ for the highest political level, the military have developed a three-level scale of warfare:



Strategic (or Theater) Level

In the context of national interests, strategy develops an idea or set of ideas of the ways to employ the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve national, multinational, and theatre objectives.



Operational Level

The operational level links the tactical employment of forces to national strategic objectives. The focus at this level is on the planning and execution of operations using operational art

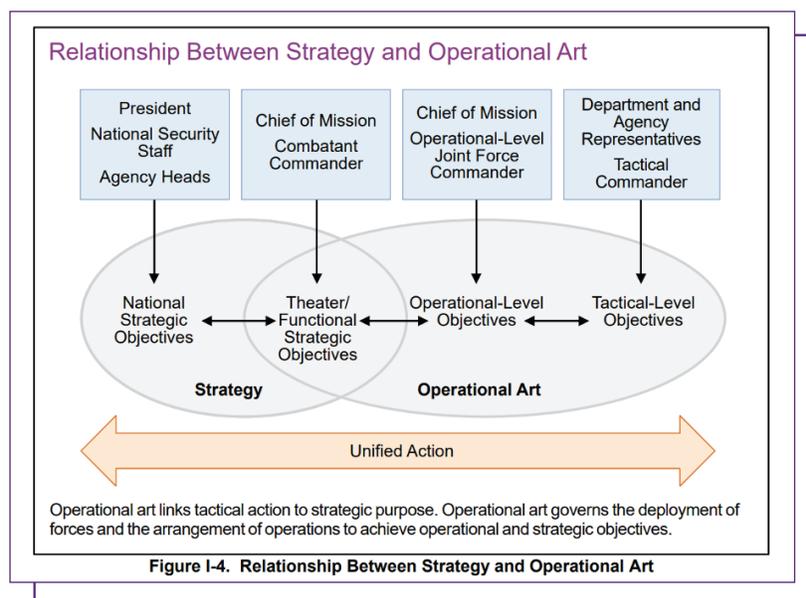


Tactical Level

Tactics is the employment, ordered arrangement, and directed actions of forces in relation to each other. Joint doctrine focuses this term on planning and executing battles, engagements, and activities at the tactical level to achieve military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces (TFs).

Below the tactical level, the military define two more detailed levels: **techniques** – non-prescriptive ways or methods used to perform missions, functions, or tasks; and **procedures** – standard, detailed steps that prescribe how to perform specific tasks (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 2020).

The military purposely use the phrase ‘operational art’ instead of strategic thinking, defined as ‘the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs— supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means’ (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 2019, IV.1). The following diagram outlines how Strategy is linked to Operational Art (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 2018, I.13):



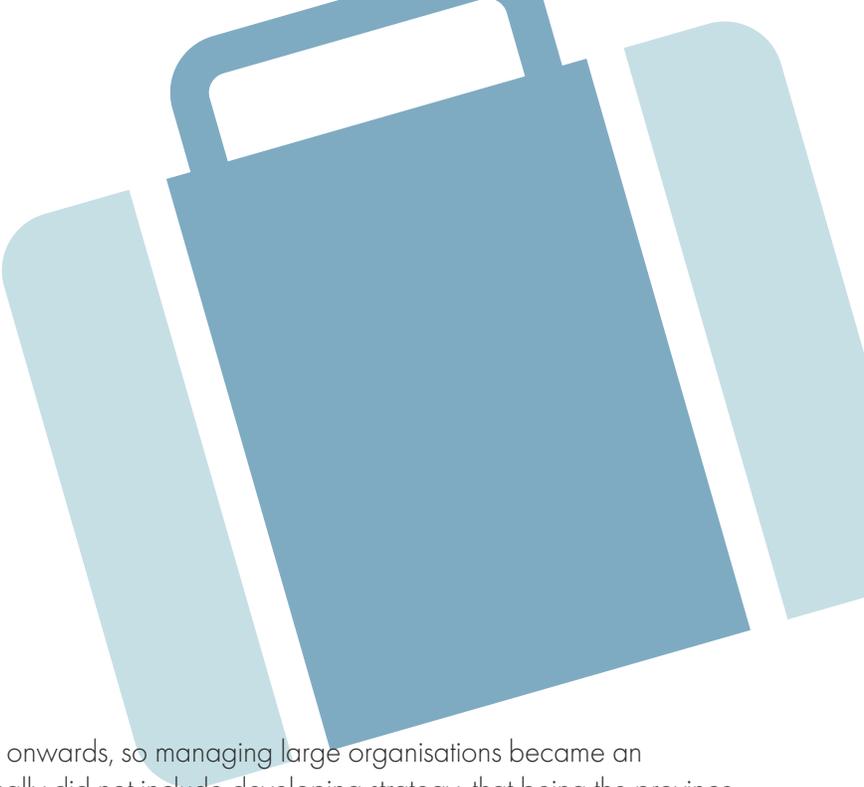
The military express the cognitive challenge in the following way (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 2019, I.1):

This “ends, ways, means” model is the basic construct of modern strategy, but it alone is inadequate to turn ideas into action. Strategy is both an iterative process and a product — the reflective synergy of art and science creating a coherent bridge from the present to the future, enabling the translation of ideas into action to get what you want while addressing potential risks to the nation.

Military academies worldwide devote a great deal of effort to develop in their commanders a mental model of how to create this ‘coherent bridge from the present to the future’. Though the detail of the strategy formation process as taught by the military is too specific to the military to be of much help to the corruption reformer, focusing on ‘commander’s intent’ and the concept of operations, the fact that the process is teachable is itself a useful lesson.

²We use references to US military doctrine in this document, but the doctrine of all NATO military forces is largely the same. There is a similar body of related NATO doctrine, together with bodies of doctrine from each individual NATO nation, which largely mirror each other.

Business Usage



As businesses grew in size from the late nineteenth century onwards, so managing large organisations became an increasingly complex endeavour. Whilst 'managing' originally did not include developing strategy, that being the province of the business owners, senior managers have come to be increasingly in charge of the direction as well as the functioning of their organisation. In the private sector, during the first half of the twentieth century, thinking moved from business magnates such as Rockefeller and Ford to theorists such as Taylor, seeking to improve the efficiency of work practices, and Drucker, analysing the practice of managers as a distinct and leading group in industrial society.

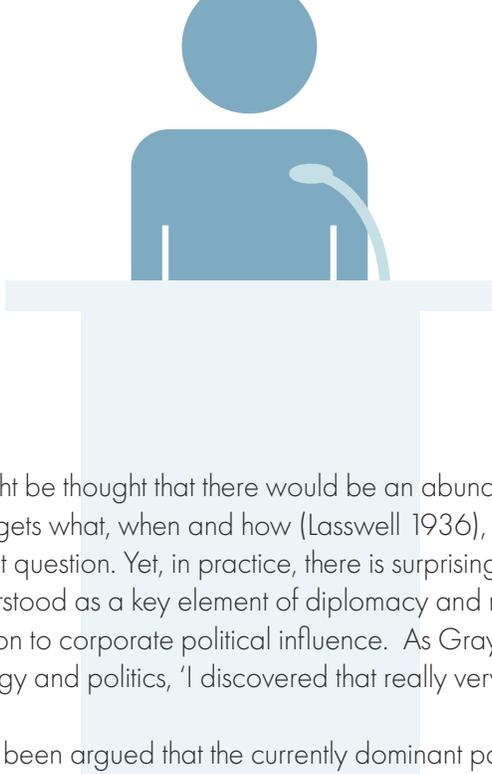
Business strategy as a distinct field of study started about 1960 (Freedman 2013, 493), with Alfred Chandler (1962) publishing *Strategy and Structure*, his seminal guide for company management. In these early days of the discipline, strategy was seen as being the desired way to achieve the overall long-term goal of the enterprise. Chandler, for example, wrote that 'Strategy is the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals' (Chandler 1962, 13).

Since then the number of books on business strategy has risen exponentially and the thinking has passed through multiple fashions: from the detailed planning approaches by the likes of Robert McNamara in Kennedy's government and at Ford Foundation in the 1960s; to competitive approaches (echoing the military elements of strategy that focus on conflict) exemplified by Michael Porter (1980); to more sociologically focused approaches based on developing a common sense of purpose, such as 'In search of excellence', the eponymous work by Peters and Waterman (1982); to emergent approaches which stress that strategy is a continuous learning response to a continually changing environment (see Maucuer and Renaud 2019).

These latter approaches, as exemplified by Mintzberg and Waters (1985), distinguish between centrally directed strategies based on an original plan and looser models, requiring learning and adaptation in the face of an environment that is 'too complex to comprehend and too imposing to defy'. Their conclusion that 'strategy formation walks on two feet, one deliberate, the other emergent' (Mintzberg and Waters 1985, 271) was ahead of its time, predating the development of the 'dual process thinking' theories noted above. Business thinkers distinguish more between different content of strategy rather than scale, with eight distinct types of strategy summarised under the following headings: planned, entrepreneurial, ideological, umbrella, process, unconnected, consensus or imposed (see Mintzberg and Waters 1985, 270).

In the more recent literature in the business and public sector world on strategy formation, arguably the most practical framework for the substance of corruption reform strategy can be found in the book, *'Good strategy, Bad strategy: the difference and why it matters'* (Rumelt 2011). In this work, Rumelt describes a good strategy as having at its centre a kernel of three core elements: a simplifying diagnosis, a 'guiding policy' that specifies the approach to dealing with the obstacles called out in the diagnosis, and a set of coherent actions (ibid. , 7).

Another fruitful area of business enquiry about new strategic thinking has been on leading change in large organisations. Managers found that the way that the organisation is itself operating, being a 'social entity that is a goal directed, deliberately structured activity' (Daft 1986, 9 cited in, Weick 2001, 7) is a major element in whether the desired strategy will get executed or whether the organisation will actively flout the intent of its leaders. In the same way as business strategy has done since the 1960s, thinking about how to lead and to sustain effective organisational change has passed through multiple fashions since the 1990s (see, for example, Senge 1990, Bridges 1991, Pascale 1993, Katzenbach 1996, Kotter 1996, Weick 2001). Similar strategies have since become normalised for leading change in the public sector. Richard Pascale, for example, who came to prominence in assisting large scale business change through a strategy of seeking out 'positive deviance', later worked with others to apply this approach to large scale change such as reducing gang violence in US cities (Pascale, Sternin, and Sternin 2010). Other thinking on large scale organisational change has been behind the trend in many governments to establish units to help make change happen, such as the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit in the UK (National Audit Office 1986, Halpern 2015). The point here, that organisational change is difficult and can be a subject for strategy in its own right, is important for corruption reform. Reformers often believe that once they have the 'political will' for change, then the reforms will be successful. However, even where there is political will for reform, organisations naturally resist change and the intentions of proposed reforms can be subverted.



Political Usage

It might be thought that there would be an abundant literature on politics and strategy. After all, if politics is essentially about who gets what, when and how (Lasswell 1936), then we might well assume that strategy lies at the heart of any answer to that question. Yet, in practice, there is surprisingly little research on political strategy *per se*, as opposed to strategy understood as a key element of diplomacy and military science, or through the lens of elections and campaigning, or in relation to corporate political influence. As Gray (2016, vi) observed when discussing mutual dependencies between strategy and politics, 'I discovered that really very little attention has been paid to this most critical of relationships'.

It has been argued that the currently dominant paradigm in the social sciences is a form of utilitarianism, according to which behaviour is motivated by its instrumentality for achieving desired ends (Getz 2001, 307). Within the discipline of political science more narrowly conceived, in addition to work on electoral and campaign strategies, there is a significant focus on public policy making. Although this work has generated many insightful approaches, it is generally concerned primarily with analysing how and why policies are translated into practice rather than focusing specifically on strategy as such. For instance, *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* (Goodin, Moran, and Rein 2008) contains 44 chapters and runs to nearly 1000 pages, yet the only index entry relating to 'strategy' is the UK Strategy Unit, mentioned on just a single page. Many of the most widely-cited approaches to public policy-making (see Weible and Sabatier 2018) – such as the stages heuristic/policy cycle, multiple streams, punctuated equilibrium, advocacy coalitions and so forth – have little to say about strategic choices. Instead, public policy research has focused overwhelmingly on policy analysis on the one hand, and policy process on the other.

The most direct focus on strategic approaches to political decision-making are in fact largely drawn from economics: notably, public choice and collective action theories, transaction costs approaches, and game theory. Such approaches tend to assume rational actors, who base their decisions on an assessment of the assumed costs and benefits of any given choice, usually taken in situations of uncertainty. Game theory, in particular, has been used to model strategy: there are many different forms and variations of game theory, but essentially players in any given game are seen as strategic decision-makers who seek to maximise their pay-off (Brans 1985). Thus, given the underpinning assumption of humans being rational actors, strategy in political analysis often amounts to little more than understanding and articulating how desired ends can be identified by individuals, with tactics then representing the specific steps or actions needed to ensure they are achieved.

A different approach to strategy comes when you are not the person 'in charge' but the person seeking to upend the established order. There is another whole literature from the perspective of the underdog, who face a large gap between the desired ends and the available means. This has come mainly in the writings of revolutionaries – notably leaders such as Lenin, Mao and Guevara – who often adopted the language of military strategy (Boggs 1977). In the words of Freedman (2013, 252): 'As Clausewitz provided a theory of war, Marx provided a theory of revolution'.

Although the insights derived from revolutionary writings may seem to offer little of use for anti-corruption reform strategies, the emphasis on understanding the nature of power, interests and institutions has been increasingly emphasised in some approaches that focus on civil society activism. Of particular note is 'systems thinking' as exemplified for instance by Duncan

Green in *How Change Happens* (2016). Green stresses the need to develop multiple strategies to address the complexity of the modern world, paying particular attention to contexts and sites in which change happens whilst recognising inevitable limits to what is possible. Such systems thinking has become increasingly influential in the field of developmental activism (see OECD 2017c, Ramos et al. 2019), but in correctly emphasising the complexity of the problems facing societies, there is a risk that it ends up privileging the analysis of systemic interdependencies over the creation of strategies to address them. In the pragmatic approach developed here and in our companion paper on the substance of strategy (Pyman and Heywood 2020), we align with Green's approach by proposing that reformers should always seek to develop several options for strategies.

DIFFERENT *SCALES* OF CORRUPTION REFORM



Seeking to change the global norms around the meaning of corruption is clearly an ambition of a different magnitude to, for instance, working to eliminate facilitation payments; the required strategies will therefore be similarly different. As Heywood (2015, 2017) has argued, in order to develop effective anti-corruption approaches, we need to target interventions at the appropriate level, taking into account distinctions between different sectors, both nationally and internationally, as well as the impact of geographical location, the relationship between public and private sectors, the nature of governance structures, level of decision-making, and so forth.

Yet, although corruption reform takes place at hugely different scales, curiously, neither the academic literature nor the guidance available to corruption reform practitioners identify these different scales, nor analyse variations in diagnosis, policy or action between one scale and another. For those engaged in efforts to reduce corruption around the world, there is a lack of guidance about what these different levels might be and how those efforts may therefore be appropriately tailored to their targets.

Part of our aim in this paper, therefore, is to identify what the different scales of change might be in corruption reform. Although the military stratification discussed above is a useful starting point, four levels may be too many (military authors themselves admit to sometimes getting muddled between theater/operational/tactical), so here we propose just three levels for corruption reform: international-scale strategies, national-scale strategies and tactical-scale strategies.

International Scale Strategy



By 'international scale' we mean the broadest scale of corruption reform, perhaps the equivalent of either 'Grand strategy' or 'Theater strategy' in the military terminology. Although there is not yet a formal definition of such reforms, we can point to a number of the most significant international-scale corruption reforms over the last fifty years:



The way that 'corruption' was defined and then formalised as 'bribery' rather than as 'political influence' in the international community and in business during the period 1970-2000. This effort was largely led and shaped by the government of the USA, which formed a clear diagnosis and maintained constancy of their guiding policy over the period (see Katzarova 2019).



The success of Transparency International and its founders in injecting the presence of 'civil society' into global development policy forums and considerations in the ten years from 1993-2003 (see Norad 2011).



The campaigns that led to the adoption of the OAS Inter-American Convention against Corruption in 1996 (Altamirano 2007), the OECD Convention on Combating Bribery in 1997 (Aiolfi 2017), and UNCAC (the United Nations Convention Against Corruption) in 2003 (see Webb 2005), as well as various other international legal agreements.



The development of international transparency rules for the extractive industries sector, leading to the creation in 2002 and subsequent growth of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) (see Sovacool et al. 2016).



The progress of global efforts to require Beneficial Ownership transparency laws in the period 2000-2020, first in the USA and then around the world (see Hernández González-Barreda 2020).



The way that the early, unstructured concept of 'dirty money' was developed into the highly organised Illicit Financial Flows efforts that exist today, led largely by the government of Norway in the period 2005-2015 (Norad 2016).



The development of Anti Money Laundering (AML) laws and frameworks following the establishment of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in 1989 (see Jakobi 2018).

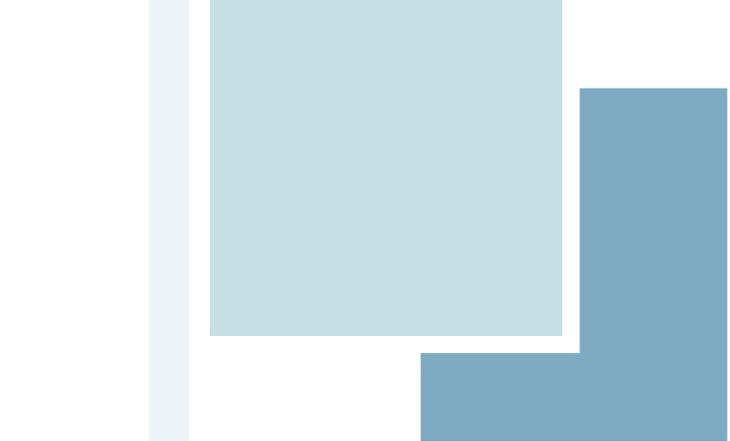


The development of the Good Governance for Medicines (GGM) programme from 2004 to date to prevent corruption in the pharmaceuticals sector (see Paschke et al. 2018).



Progress towards cleaner public sector procurement worldwide, through the efforts of the World Bank, the Open Government Partnership and the Open Contracting Partnership (Weaver 2019, see also Bauhr et al. 2019).

Whilst this list is not exhaustive, what emerges is that these reforms seek to achieve three different types of objective. First, they aim to **change norms** around corruption and what is seen as acceptable to society; second, they seek to **improve laws**, through establishing international benchmarks or through treaty requirements; third, they try to **improve sector functioning**, focusing on the operation of particular domains such as banking, health, procurement and so forth.



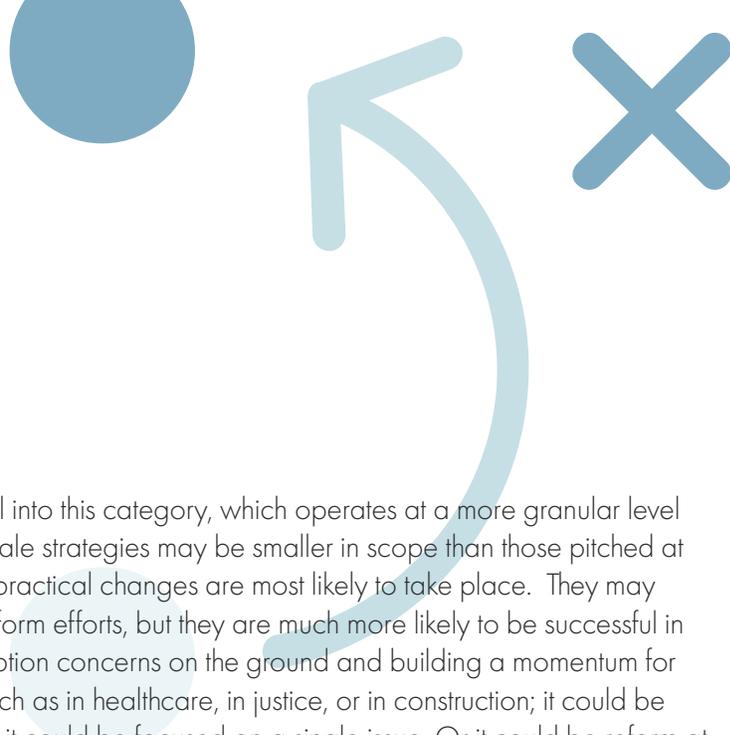
National Scale Strategy

Whilst many, including the present authors (Heywood 2017, 2018, Pyman et al. 2017, 2018), challenge the effectiveness of seeking change at the scale of the nation-state, most corruption reform analyses and recommendations have focused at country level. Amongst the very many examples we could point to are the following five broad types. First, radical corruption reform led at nation-state level, sometimes referred to, following Rothstein (2011), as a 'big bang' to reflect the seizing of an opportunity that comes through events that may seem unrelated specifically to corruption (for instance, military defeat or extreme political perturbation). In practice, examples of such rapid and comprehensive reform are rare, although some point to Estonia and Georgia as recent cases (Kalniņš 2017, Kupatadze 2016, see also Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston 2017). Second, more gradual yet still comprehensive national-level anti-corruption reforms led from above have achieved notable success in a select number of places. Much attention, for instance, has been paid to cases such as Botswana and Chile during the 1960s and Hong Kong and Singapore in the 1970s (see, for example, Jones David 2017, Silva 2019, Quah 2017).

A third example entails more narrowly focused and direct targeting of corruption, such as through a national anti-corruption strategy or the establishment of a national anti-corruption agency or specialist corruption court. In general, there is little evidence to suggest that such bodies have proved particularly effective (see, for example, Doig 1995, UNDP 1998, McCusker 2006, Zhang and Lavina 2015). Fourth, there may be drives for stronger national anti-corruption laws, of which the stand-out example is the UK's 2010 Bribery Act that represented the culmination of a decade-long campaign, largely spearheaded by the UK chapter of Transparency International (see Barrington 2020). Finally, there are efforts by international development agencies to promote anti-corruption abroad, although the record of foreign aid being used to tackle corruption as a development challenge has hardly been one of great success, its transformative capacity described in one recent study as being largely mythical (Mungiu-Pippidi 2019, see also, Klitgaard 2015, Weber, O'Regan, and Brown 2020).

As with the international-scale reforms, those that operate at national-scale also seek to change norms around corruption, as well as to improve laws. However, unlike the international-scale reforms, they also feature additional objectives, sometimes implicitly or indirectly: nation-state level political change, more prosecution of corrupt actors, strengthening of national security, improving economic prosperity, and so forth. These objectives are discussed further below.

Although there has been important recent scholarship examining anti-corruption strategies at the level of nation-states, much of it has sought to explain and analyse past trajectories rather than provide guidance for future strategy formation (see Mungiu-Pippidi 2015, Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston 2017). As such, whilst we now have a much better understanding of the many routes by which individual nation-states have reached a given equilibrium – be that one characterised by pervasive or limited levels of corruption – we still have limited capacity to explain how to develop an appropriate strategy for any specific country at a particular starting point. Indeed, 'success' at country level may often reflect a succession of what we term tactical-scale reforms, as happened for instance in the case of Taiwan's progress towards good governance, based on a series of separate initiatives rather than an overarching national anti-corruption strategy (Göbel 2017).



Tactical Scale Strategy

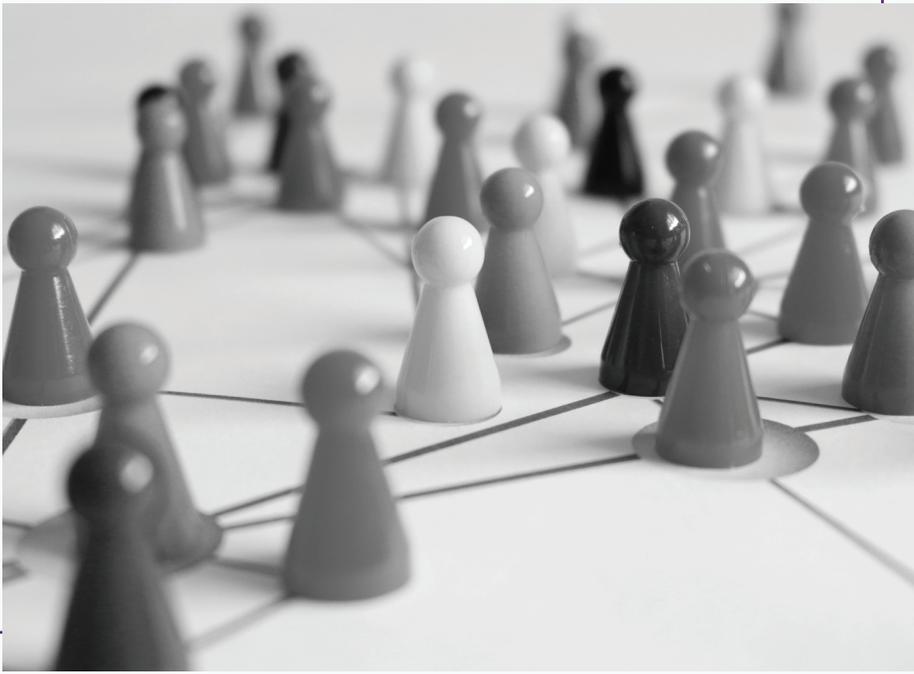
The overwhelming majority of actual anti-corruption reforms fall into this category, which operates at a more granular level than the international or national scale. Although the tactical scale strategies may be smaller in scope than those pitched at the national or international scale, it is at this level that positive practical changes are most likely to take place. They may not attract the same kind of attention as national showpiece reform efforts, but they are much more likely to be successful in making a genuine difference to the reality of addressing corruption concerns on the ground and building a momentum for sustainable change. Tactical scale reform might be sectoral, such as in healthcare, in justice, or in construction; it could be geographical, such as within a province, municipality or a city; it could be focused on a single issue. Or it could be reform at a more tactical level still, such as a manager reducing corruption in his/her specific sphere of responsibility.

Although we argue that there has been insufficient attention paid to what ‘strategy’ means in the context of tackling corruption, there is nevertheless guidance available for developing broad anti-corruption strategies. It comes mainly from development agencies, such as the UNDP (2014) and UNODC (2015) and from anti-corruption NGOs, such as Transparency International (2013), or sometimes from researchers (see, for example, Rotberg 2017). These emphasise the need to ensure support from political leaders, to consult with national agencies and with opposition leaders, to engage all sectors of society, focus on good communications and transparency and to learn from other countries’ experience. Such advice usually promotes a whole-of-government approach.

In response to these somewhat ‘cookie-cutter’ process-driven approaches, more sophisticated guidance has also been developed for reform in recent years that reflects significant advances in our understanding of the drivers and operation of corruption, notably in relation to the role of contextual specificity and the relationship between contingency and governance orders (see, for example, Mungiu-Pippidi 2018, Mungiu-Pippidi and Cizmaziouva 2020). Also notable has been recent work by the ‘Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice’ (TWP) that seeks to take into account the political nature of corruption and the challenges this presents for reform. Advocates of TWP place major emphasis on the importance of reforms being informed by Political Economy Analysis (PEA) (see Rocha Menocal et al. 2018) as well as the need to take into account the often complicated way that corruption issues are intertwined with other political and social drivers (see, for example, Marquette and Peiffer 2018). A further strand of thinking emphasises the inherently complex and uncertain nature of such reform, leading to an emphasis on iteration and adaptation in the approach. The best-known example is the Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) approach of Andrews et al. (2012). In a similar way to the business literature noted above on improving the ability of large organisations to change, the PDIA approach seeks to improve states’ capacity to implement their policies and programmes. The authors propose four principles: local solutions for local problems, pushing problem-driven positive deviance, try/learn/iterate/adapt, and scale through engaging champions across sectors and organisations.

It remains the case, though, that many of these ‘systems approaches’ (OECD 2017c) can still be quite abstract, focusing on core principles and theoretical frameworks as part of a more holistic attempt to understand corruption. The experience of one of the current authors (Pyman 2017, 2020) of sitting with reforming government ministers and other officials in a variety of developed and developing countries is that what they are really looking for is more concrete guidance on how to develop

the substance. They recognise the corruption problems, they know the politics, they are aware of possible reforms, but they desperately want guidance on how to formulate this material into a possible reform strategy as well as how to make judgements between different possible strategies. This is not an issue of developed versus developing countries. Indeed, Pyman has had this almost identical experience from two health ministers, one in Afghanistan the other in Greece, each remarking: 'I know the health issues, the politics and the context, but I know little about strategies for tackling corruption. Help me, how do I understand what approaches I could consider, and how do I decide which ones are likely to have the best chance of success?'



THE *SUBSTANCE* OF REFORM STRATEGY

As noted in the introduction, strategy means there is some insight or diagnosis involved that allows choices to be made and options discarded, seeing the wood for the trees, consideration of how others may react and a synthesis of this into a set of actions that could change the situation. These elements form the substance of the strategy, as distinct from the process to be followed in developing a strategy or the other components of formal strategy such as governance, management, coordination or reporting.

Formulating the substance of the strategy comprises several separate but closely interlinked activities: clarifying the purpose and the objectives, making an insightful diagnosis, formulating an overall approach that guides the reformers, within which is included choosing which reform techniques will be preferred that will give reality to the strategy.



Clarifying and Re-Framing the Objectives

The military pays a lot of attention to developing clear purpose and objectives. In current NATO allied command doctrine, the objective is expressed as the *Commander's Intent* (NATO 2019, x), which is the

clear and concise expression of what the force must do and the conditions the force must establish to accomplish the mission. It is a succinct, written description of the commander's visualization of the entire operation and what the commander wants to accomplish. The commander will communicate the intent to the staff and subordinate commands ensuring a common understanding

However, in corruption reform, objectives can be deceptive. Reducing corruption may seem to be the obvious objective, but sometimes corruption is merely acting as the visible constraint on a particular functional improvement such as improved healthcare or lower electricity costs for citizens. In such cases, the more appropriate direct objective may well be to enhance healthcare provision or to introduce a more competitive market in energy provision, rather than to focus on combating corruption. The label of corruption may alternatively be serving as a catch-all for a complex of other failings. Guidance on strategy formulation in corruption reform needs to give concrete help to decide how best to frame the objectives, starting with the choice of *direct* or *indirect* framing.

Direct framing is where it makes sense to express the objective as 'reducing corruption'. An example is the objective to establish a new anti-corruption law, to which the reform leaders should hold true despite many twists and turns of circumstance. For example, in the USA the campaign to pass a bill requiring transparency of corporate beneficial ownership began in 2000, driven by Senator Carl Levin and the US Senate Permanent Sub-Committee of Investigations, which Levin chaired. Like the UK Bribery Act, Levin and his supporters kept to the objective of passing a bill, modifying it multiple times in response to objections, over a fifteen year period from 2000 to 2015 (Bean 2018). Sometimes, whilst still direct, an interim objective is better. The US experience just noted diverted to this once it became clear that the bill would never get enough support to pass. By 2016, the Financial Accountability and Corporate Transparency (FACT) Coalition supporting the legislative reform realised that the bill would not pass until each opponent was won over individually. The objective, or perhaps FACT's objective, was therefore re-defined as winning over each opponent, even though this meant a recognition that several more years of patient lobbying would be required.

Indirect framing is relevant for corruption reform when the underlying objective – such as improving hospital access – is the problem and corruption is one of the reasons why it is not being solved. Sometimes a *proximate objective* is preferable

in situations where the reality is too complex to be easily communicated. This is where an objective is chosen that is close enough at hand to be feasible and with a reasonable expectation of being achieved. The classic example was the US President's call in 1961 to place a man on the moon, a proxy for catching up with the USSR's overwhelming lead in space; a call that was clear, motivating, achievable and cut through all the technical complexity of rocket science. An example in corruption reform was the campaign against the international flow of the proceeds of corruption. This could have been articulated as a direct anti-corruption reform, but it was better articulated as something else; first 'dirty money' and then Illicit Financial Flows or IFF (Norad 2016). A recent tactical scale example of using a proximate objective advantageously is the campaign in some US states to address corruption by limiting electoral finance contributions, couched in terms of stressing the need to reduce out-of-state influence rather than talking of anti-corruption (on the story of the North Dakota campaign, see representUS 2018, see also Wilcox 2005).

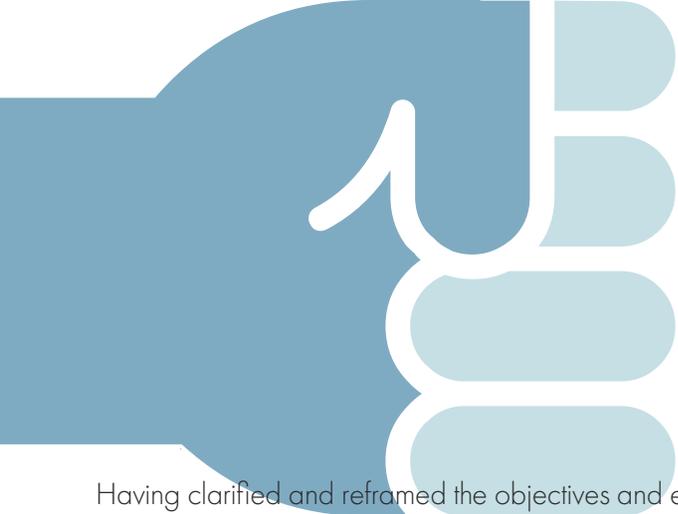
Sometimes, where the situation is highly dynamic and unpredictable, it hardly makes sense to have any overarching objective at all: better simply to go for a *minimalist objective* and instead make small progress steps as the opportunities arise. In the language of military doctrine: 'Such Intuitive decision making ... normally involves pattern recognition based on knowledge, judgment, experience, education, intelligence, boldness, perception, and character.... It may be more effective when time is short; and relies on a commander's experience and ability to recognize the key elements and implications of a particular problem or situation' (US Army 2019, S2.2ff).



Making a Diagnosis that Defines a Domain of Action

A comprehensive analysis of all the factors involved can inform, but a strategy needs a diagnosis that ‘simplifies the often overwhelming ill-structured complexity of reality by identifying certain aspects of the situation as critical’ (Rumelt 2011, 79). A good diagnosis does more than explain a situation, it also defines a domain of action. At a minimum, the diagnosis names or classifies the situation, which can open up access to knowledge about how analogous situations were handled in the past. However, there is as yet no good understanding in the anti-corruption field of what constitutes a good diagnosis. On the one hand, while analyses of the corruption problems and of the related political economy have become increasingly available, their complexity often stops them from serving as a diagnosis in the sense of offering the essential extra step of ‘calling attention to those aspects that make sense of the situation’ or ‘defining a domain of action’. On the other hand, the difficulty of diagnosis is also caused by the lack of knowledge and insufficient sophistication in knowing what to do. Heywood (2017, 47) concluded that, without greater analytic sophistication and depth, ‘it will remain difficult to develop interventions that have an impact on the lived reality of specific instances of actual corrupt practices, as opposed to generic observations about which places are more corrupt than others.’

Better diagnostic approaches can be employed. Pyman (2020), for instance, disaggregates the overall corruption concern first by sector and then by corruption issue, with many (though not all) of the issues being specific to the sector. These can then be triaged, in discussion among colleagues, stakeholders and others, according to their impact on outcomes, on costs, on citizen satisfaction, and other relevant criteria. Deeper insights, such as the economic drivers and the particular ways in which the public and private groups interact, can also be obtained by looking at corruption within sectors.



Developing an *Actionable* Reform Approach

Having clarified and reframed the objectives and engaged in a process of diagnosis that identifies a domain of activity, we need next to define what that activity may entail in practice. However, rather than be too prescriptive, the aim is to establish what in the business world has been termed ‘guiding policy’, which ‘outlines the overall approach without defining what exactly should be done in a given situation but rules out a vast array of possible actions’ (Rumelt 2011, 84). As ‘policy’ has a very specific connotation in political settings, we propose a better description in the context of anti-corruption is ‘*actionable reform approach*’. By this, we mean the following:

‘Actionable’ excludes approaches that are impossible, theoretical or simply a statement of desire. The approach obviously needs to encompass feasible ways forward. As Khan et al. (2016, 1) point out, ‘In societies that have widespread rule violations, high-impact anti-corruption is only likely to be feasible if the overall strategy succeeds in aligning the interests and capabilities of powerful organizations at the sectoral level to support the enforcement of particular sets of rules.’ Approaches such as ‘ensuring agents hold principals to account’ have no actionable applicability in situations where the governing equilibrium is particularistic, since in such situations there is no meaningful agency to be exercised (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Similarly, declarations that more political will is required or the judicial system needs strengthening may reflect genuinely held desires, but they are not actionable approaches: when political will or judicial capacity is lacking, there are usually deep-seated structural reasons for that lack.

‘Reform’ emphasises that this activity is not about restating the challenge to be addressed, the problems it gives rise to, or the underlying causes. It is focused squarely on the constructive side, that is how to go about engaging in real reform by identifying feasible interventions and actions that can be taken to change a situation for the better.

‘Approach’ signifies that this is about the broad direction, not the specific reform measures. The overall approach encompasses the available leverage and sources of advantage available to the reformers. It takes into account the broader political context, the support they can garner and the likely opposition they will face. The corruption reform world has a tendency to conflate the overall approach with specific measures. For instance, ‘transparency’ can be an overall reform approach – seeking transparency-based solutions as used by the international extractive sector initiative EITI, for example – or it can refer to a specific technique, such as the publication of the details of a national oil budget when before it was available only at aggregated level.

The distinction between broad direction and *specific reform* measures recalls the military conception referred to at the start of this paper, in which ‘techniques and procedures’ encompass the essential detail below the strategic, operational and tactical scales of warfare (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 2020). By this they do not mean paper procedures, but specific techniques such as tank pincer movements or frontal infantry assaults. In the anti-corruption world these might translate as individual techniques like transparency of the budget, e-procurement, asset declarations, establishing an anti-corruption agency, and so forth. Below, adapted from Pyman (2020), we outline six examples of what we mean by actionable reform approach that can serve as a guiding framework for more specific reform measures:

Multiple small reforms approach

Working deliberately with small changes can help build momentum and credibility for reform, whilst minimising the scope for political opposition and paving the way to take advantage of larger opportunities if and when they occur. This approach is consistent with the recent advice in the European Commission’s toolbox for practitioners seeking to promote good governance through public administration reforms (European Commission 2017). Citing Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, 42), they note that ‘[a]dministrative systems are often difficult to change in more-than-incremental ways.’ Research on organisational sense-making similarly suggests that it is helpful to recast large problems into smaller ones (Weick 2001, 247). Indeed, academic research confirms that in the field of anti-corruption, this low-profile approach of making steady progress whilst awaiting larger opportunities is the more common route to success. In the words of Mungiu-Pippidi (2016, 104), ‘[a] governance order can be changed, but change will occur gradually and punctuated equilibria will be the rule.’

Rapid, radical reform approach

Following on from the point above, when there is a political opening through some disruption of the prevailing equilibrium, there may be the chance to make significant change through radical reform. The so-called ‘big bang’ changes referred to above in relation to Georgia and Estonia were examples of this. A radical approach can be appropriate in other circumstances too, for example when needing to make major change in a large organisation. Staff in most such organisations, whether they be global commercial enterprises or government ministries, become expert at subverting change initiatives. Making a dramatic and sudden step change may be the only possible way to counteract such subversion; another example might be to cut a reform-resistant ministry into two or more pieces to make it easier to tackle reform in manageable chunks. The same radical approach can also be useful on a smaller scale, for instance, by suddenly and publicly removing a senior member of a directorate known to be involved in corrupt activities.

‘Bundling’ reform approach

Well understood by politicians, a deliberate bundling of reforms may be the best approach in environments where each individual reform will be seen through a polarised political lens. This may allow the package of reform measure to be approved even whilst individual ones are strongly opposed by particular groupings. The US example quoted earlier, in relation to using a proximate objective to address corruption in electoral finance contributions, used this approach of bundling 5-10 reforms onto the ballot paper.

‘Keeping-up-hope’ reform approach

In highly hostile environments it can be hard to imagine any approach that might be tolerated, let alone have an impact. In such cases, perhaps the only approach is one that could be described as ‘keeping up hope’ where a few modest reforms, perhaps even ones that seem trivially small, are initiated. The purpose is not to have material impact - almost by definition the reforms would be shut down if they did have an impact - but to continue to give hope to those working in the system that change is still being contemplated and that they should not despair. Officials working in such situations know very well what the politics are and will often energetically join in with such modest reforms precisely because they too share the goal of keeping up hope. The training programmes initiated in the Ukraine security service before the Maidan revolution in 2014 is one such example (Pyman 2017), as were some of the reforms in the military and police in Afghanistan (see Pyman 2015, Pyman, Mohammadi, and Sarag 2016).

Integrity-centred reform approach

In situations where the mere mention of corruption has negative consequences, even when describing successes (Peiffer 2018), it may be more realistic to gain traction for reform measures if they are couched in terms of integrity (but cf. Heywood and Kirby 2020). For instance, the OECD has placed major emphasis in recent years on the need to build public integrity, seen as essential for building strong institutions and creating more inclusive societies (OECD 2017a, b). The NATO defence sector anti-corruption initiative was branded ‘Building Integrity’ from its start in 2007, despite being fully within the normal definition of corruption reform (NATO 2020).

Monitoring-centred reform approach

Rather than tackle the substance of the corruption issues directly, an alternative reform approach is to set up dedicated monitoring in a given sector. One option is to use sector-focused NGOs specifically established for the purpose – as was the case, for example, with the quarterly monitoring teams established by the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC) in Afghanistan to track progress in health, education and the attorney general’s operations (MEC 2019).

Whilst there is no theoretical limit to the possible number of such actionable reform approaches, it is helpful for practitioners if just a limited number of the more common approaches are presented. This can form the basis for practical discussions that they can hold with their colleagues of which approaches could work best for them. Pyman (2020) and Pyman and Heywood (2020) put forward schema for such reform approaches, but more development and research on which approaches have been used in practice, and with what results, is needed.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that in order to develop effective strategies to combat corruption, we first need to recapture the proper meaning of ‘strategy’. In doing so, we have returned to the roots of the term in its military and business usage to explore how that can inform the way we should focus on anti-corruption. In particular, we have placed emphasis on different scales of reform, distinguishing between international, national and tactical to show how they may call for different types of reform strategy. Whilst corruption reform is a less well-travelled domain than war or commerce, we have learnt many things from anti-corruption reform initiatives over the past three decades. These include the recognition that corruption is an umbrella term, so reformers need to disaggregate it into component issues to get sufficient understanding of what they are actually addressing; that because corruption is so closely connected with the way that power is distributed, there is a need to integrate political thinking into the design of any anti-corruption initiatives; that labelling a problem as being about ‘corruption’ can in fact be a way of vocalising different issues.

In short, we make the case that a more strategic approach to tackling corruption is essential if we are to improve upon the underwhelming record of reform efforts undertaken over the last quarter century. However, we should also add a word of caution. We do not wish to argue that developing better strategy would serve as some kind of panacea, leading to the automatic implementation of effective reform measures. Indeed, despite all the efforts to instil a formal mental model of strategy formulation into military officers, there is ongoing and energetic debate among those concerned with strategy formulation about whether strategy can be as useful as we all would like to believe. In the words of Betts (2000, 7):

Among practitioners, politicians often conflate strategy with policy objectives (focusing on what the desired outcome should be, simply assuming that force will move the adversary toward it), while soldiers often conflate strategy with operations (focusing on how to destroy targets or defeat enemies tactically, assuming that positive military effects mean positive policy effects). Both policymakers and soldiers have more than they can handle, working around the clock, to deal with the demanding problems in their respective realms, with neither focusing intently on the linkage—the bridge between objectives and operations, the mechanism by which combat will achieve objectives. Strategy becomes whatever slogans and unexamined assumptions occur to them in the moments left over from coping with their main preoccupations.

More prosaically, as the heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson observed, ‘everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth’.

None the less, we believe there is now sufficient knowledge about corruption that those involved in anti-corruption efforts should be able to shift up a gear, and move on from engaging in ever more detailed analysis of the nature, causes and impact of the ‘problem’; instead, what we need now are methodologies that can serve as handrails for reformers to develop better content for their reform strategies. To follow the business metaphor mentioned earlier, this should include guidance on how to make a diagnosis that simplifies the complexity; guidance on how to reframe the objectives so initiatives have a better chance of success; guidance on how to select a reform policy that best uses the available sources of leverage and advantage; and guidance on what are the possible reform measures.

In developing such strategic guidance, we have argued three key elements should be in place: the specific problems to be addressed need to be diagnosed and prioritised; the purpose and objectives of the intended reform need to be reformulated accordingly; an actionable reform approach needs to be identified, including the choices to be made about which specific reform measures will be preferred. In a companion paper (Pyman and Heywood 2020), we set out in more detail how these three elements can be implemented, with an emphasis on disaggregating corruption problems in order to reformulate them in ways that allow for realistic reform options to be prioritised.

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