# Corruption in public administration: an ethnographic approach

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### Corruption in public administration: an ethnographic approach, edited by Davide Torsello, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016, 272 pp., £80.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78536-258-3

Corruption manifests itself at all levels of society, from multinational corporations to small companies; in both developing countries and well-established democracies. An extensive amount of research has emerged over the years aimed at better understanding the causes and the consequences of corruption and designing policies and interventions in the fight against it. While there is no shortage of scholarship on the topic of corruption, comparative studies of corruption are a relatively recent research topic, partly due to difficulties with reliable data. Even rarer are anthropological studies dealing with the phenomenon. Since corruption presents itself differently in each country, some scholars have begun calling for the need for more micro level studies of corruption that can provide a detailed single country focus. These studies, particularly in the context of government corruption, may aid policy-makers in identifying interventions to uncover, combat and prevent these insidious activities (Erickson & Hills, 2007)

Davide Torsello's edited volume, *Corruption in Public Administration: An Ethnographic Approach* seeks to bridge the gap in the current corruption literature between macro level quantitative indicators of corruption and micro level qualitative evidence through an ethnographic approach to the study of corruption in public administration. Using a qualitative approach, scholars from eight different countries contribute to the volume by utilizing their extensive fieldwork data (more than 1,000 surveys and 700 interviews were conducted) and following ethnographic methodologies ranging from surveys; in-depth individual, expert and semi-structured interviews; participant observations; analysis of corruption-related media coverage; round-table discussions; and focus groups. According to Torsello, 'What constitutes the real novelty of this work is the common focus the authors of each chapter share on public administration environments in all of their case studies. To our knowledge, this is the first time that a book on corruption assumes such a research scope' (p. 235).

Utilizing words and insights of professionals working in the field of public administration, the authors explore how corruption is experienced and understood by civil servants. One major focus centers on the definition and operationalization of corruption: what these public sector workers describe as corruption as well as what they have not. Additional common themes that were identified from the case studies include: working and societal ethics; public versus private good; cultural stigmas and gift –exchanging practices.

A key underlying issue expressed throughout the book is the definition of public corruption which has been broadly understood as placing private interests over the public good in public office. This widely accepted definition of corruption has given way to policies concerning transparency and 'good governance' (Haller & Shore, 2005). This is because most corrupt acts involve a bargain between the official and some private actor. The official uses the powers of office to create gains for the private partner beyond those one could earn without government intervention.

However, a foundational problem identified by some anthropological scholars is that this definition is based on divisions that are not universal. Johnston (2005) emphasizes that '"abuse," "public," "private," and even "benefit" are matters of contention in many societies and of varying degrees of ambiguity in most'. According to Torsello, from an anthropologist perspective this is very problematic and he asserts 'anthropology cannot agree with a definition stating a neat distinction between private and public roles…rather than accepting the public/private dichotomy,

anthropologists dealing with corruption stress the different ways in each variant actors conceive, contest and operationalize it.' (p. 2).

The author begins the volume by summarizing the different ethnographic perspectives of public corruption including normative, hermeneutical and transactional (or social exchange theory). He then briefly outlines some methodological issues with ethnographic research on corruption noting that participant observation is insufficient while the use of interviews in the best option. He then summarizes several conceptual problems such as the aforementioned public/private dichotomy; the need for a holistic approach and concerns regarding the typologies of corruption.

Eight countries provide the basis for the case studies on public sector corruption. These include:

- Monza, Italy. Understanding the impact of new anti-corruption legislation and the aftermath of a corruption-related scandal know as 'Clean City' provided the basis for the first case study.
- Budapest, Hungary. The perception that public sectors workers have of challenges to integrity and how these influence their daily tasks was the focus on the second case study.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina. Party corruption in the public employment system served as the basis for case observation.
- Russia. Academic dishonesty in the areas of university admission and university teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels was the focal point of observation.
- Pristina, Kosovo. The ethnographic study centered on how activism and civil engagement against corruption occurs; and understanding how the public sphere is transformed by bureaucratic and international interventions and what these means for the making of citizenship served.
- Turkey. Socio-cultural dimensions of corruption including the existence of various types of common practices in the country that are not seen as corrupt although they can be considered as corrupt were identified and analyzed.
- Chiapas, Mexico (Guadalupe Tepeyac, San Quintin, Las Margaritas and Emiliano Zapata). Patronage and clientelism were explored as primary enablers of corrupt transactions.
- Kinondoni district of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Attitudes towards corruption in the public health sector served as the primary inquiry in the last case study.

Torsello centers much of his analysis on the meaning of public and private goods, and the nature of gift-exchange in different cultures. In all of the countries studied there existed a high level of understanding of what corruption means including what a public officer is and the perceived public costs of corruption. Corruption was not seen as a private sector white collar crime nor was public sector corruption seen as a form of violence. According to Torsello, 'Unanimous opinion from the eight countries shows that forms of public corruption in public administration rarely take the shape of impositions, such as extortion, on public officials.' (p.238).

Another significant issue that emerged from all of the case studies is the difficulty of judging when exchanging a gift may be an instance of bribery. Torsello posits 'The difficult analytical issue about the relationship between local gift-exchange practices and corruption is that when these practices are embedded into ideas of sociability, hospitality and dependence on interpersonal networks in general, they cannot easily be discerned from illicit and semi-illicit transactions' (p. 245).

The author concludes the volume with several practical guidelines for policy makers covering areas of perception of corruption; understanding of corruption and work ethics; organizational change (primarily changes required as a result of European Union enlargement process or other international good governance requirements); positive innovations for improving integrity and gift-exchange and cultural practices.

Torsello's book has two core strengths: (1) it represents a holistic take on the concept of corruption including socio-cultural dimensions, which helps broaden our understanding of its devastating effects; and 2) it compliments existing quantitative studies on corruption and makes an important contribution to the understanding of what civil servants view as corrupt practices as well as practices not deemed corrupt. The book provides a range of interesting practical policy solutions (especially in the area of gift-exchange) that are worth examining in more detail through further research and experimentation. It is a valuable addition to the literature of public corruption and presents an important resource for students, practitioners and scholars of public services globally.

### References

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## Building a better international NGO: Greater than the sum of the parts? by James Crowley and Morgana Ryan, Boulder, CO, Kumarian Press, 2013, 208 pp., US$25.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-56549-583-8

The book *Building a Better International NGO: Greater than the Sum of the Parts?* was primarily written for the attention of senior executives, CEOs, and chairs and active board members of large international NGOs (INGOs). Each chapter focuses on a different functional area of INGOs and the main issues facing these organizations, outlining key points and action items for those in leadership positions or affiliations with INGOs, and working as a guide for developing and advancing these topical areas within a given INGO.

This book acts as a resource for directing those affiliated with international NGOs (INGOs) to make maximum-impact contributions to their organizations, and become 'greater than the sum of their parts.' This means the benefits of being part of a broader international organization should exceed, in aggregate, the cost and efforts of coordinating and managing the global organization (p. 4). To take this a step further, the book is trying to address the question whether the economies of scale and scope are greater than the implied additional costs of management, coordination, alignment, and integration for an INGO (p. 4-5.)

The introduction by the authors lays the foundation for the dynamic shift in creating change the authors hope to guide INGO leaders to attain. They believe incremental change, while positive, will not get the collective 'us' to where the particular NGO needs to be. Rather, the INGO must meet its obligation to strengthen and modernize its organization and management approach at the international level (p. xvi) while developing major breakthroughs outside of