

U4 Expert Answer



Technology against corruption: the potential of online corruption-reporting apps and other platforms

Query

Please provide an overview of how online corruption-reporting tools have been used around the world, and consider their effectiveness and impact, as well as their limitations and the lessons learned.

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The second section provides a brief overview of different corruption-reporting tools in countries as diverse as Cambodia, India, Lebanon, Romania and Russia. This section also shows that while some of the platforms gained recognition due to their achievements, others failed despite the initial media buzz and popular excitement.

The third section looks at the common challenges that online corruption reporting platforms face in order to succeed, including getting reliable data, reaching a critical mass of users and adapting to the local context, among others. The final section highlights some of the lessons learned so far.

Summary

Around the world, civil society organisations (CSOs) and governments are experimenting with information communication technology (ICT) platforms that try to encourage and project citizen voice, with the goal of improving public service delivery and fighting corruption.

The first section of this expert answer provides an overview of the many ways in which ICTs can help curb corruption: from improving access to information and reducing red-tape, to detection of potential cases of corruption and the identification of outliers and other anomalies. This section also identifies corruption reporting platforms as one of the most popular attempts to use technology to curb corruption.

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U4 is a resource centre for development practitioners who wish to effectively address corruption challenges in their work. Expert Answers are produced by the U4 Helpdesk – operated by Transparency International – as quick responses to operational and policy questions from U4 Partner Agency staff.

1. The use of technology against corruption

There is a broad consensus that information communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential to make a significant contribution to the fight against corruption. By facilitating the flow of information between government institutions, between government and citizens and among citizens, new technologies can promote transparency, accountability and civic participation (Chêne 2012).

For several years, scholars have been looking at the role social media and other internet and other ICTs can play in the fight against corruption. Today, there are few doubts that the correct use of ICTs can play a vital role in a successful national integrity system (Sturges 2004; Bertot et al. 2010; Elbahnasawy 2014; Gurin 2014; Starke et al. 2016), and ICTs are increasingly seen by governments and civil society as important tools to promote transparency and accountability as well as to identify and reduce corruption (Wickberg 2013: 1).

The ways in which ICTs can potentially contribute to the fight against corruption have also been thoroughly explored by the academic and policy literature. As summarised by Grönlund (2010) and Zinnbauer (2012: 5), the main expected benefits from ICTs include:

- reductions of information asymmetries between public office holders and citizens so that the latter can find it easier to assert their rights
- limiting the discretion of office holders to diverge from applicable rules in the exercise of their duties
- automation of specific processes and reduction of direct, frequent, personal interaction between public officials and individual citizens, which can increase the risks of collusion and corruption
- reduction of red-tape in public bureaucracies and thus remove potential entry points for extortion and corrupt rent-seeking
- removal of gatekeepers or intermediaries who facilitate bribe payments or demand their own illicit cut to make a business deal happen
- increasing transparency, which can help reduce the room for corruption by making processes documentable and auditable
- raising awareness to empower the public and inform them about their right to resist arbitrary treatment
- promotion of ethical attitudes through public engagement and online discussions

- enabling collective action through the provision of a growing repertoire of tools and platforms for citizens to organise, report and mobilise against corruption
- detection of potential cases of corruption through the identification of outliers, underperformance and other anomalies.
- preventive detection through monitoring of networks and individuals

As a result of the seemingly endless potential of ICTs to fight corruption, new technologies, in the form of websites, mobile phones, applications etc., have been used to: facilitate the reporting of corruption; provide access to official information; monitor the efficiency and integrity of social services and of a country's political life; and to make financial information more transparent. There are also examples of technology being used to support campaigning efforts and, over the last decade, governments have launched an increasing number of e-government initiatives to enhance the efficiency and transparency of public administration and improve interaction with citizens (Wickberg 2013: 1).

A tool that has generated a lot of interest, especially among the media and anti-corruption practitioners, is the crowd-based corruption-reporting apps. These apps have taken advantage of the rapidly increasing internet and mobile technology in the developed world to provide a solution to bribery. The idea is simple: citizens with internet access can use their smartphones or computers to report bribery incidents almost instantaneously (Crawford 2014). They can anonymously report the amount of the bribe, the recipient and the institution that took or demanded it. Users of the app or website can also read the reports. Some of these apps also incorporate the data gathered into "heat maps" that aggregate the reports to demonstrate where bribery is most prevalent and allow filtering of the data by region, year and institution.

This expert answer provides a short overview of where these apps have been used, the impact they have had and the lessons learned from their use so far.

The use of corruption-reporting platforms

Over the past five to ten years, corruption-reporting apps have been launched in countries all over the world with the objective of drawing attention to the scale, scope and geographic spread of corruption – mostly in the form of bribe payments.

As explained by Zinnbauer (2015), the idea behind these apps is straightforward, and there are three main mechanisms through which these tools are expected to assist in the fight against corruption:

- First, providing easy access to an instantaneous anonymous and straightforward reporting tool, empowers citizens to complain safely, loudly and visibly when corrupt officials and public service providers abuse their positions of entrusted power to extort bribes from citizens. By doing so, these tools seek to deter corruption through the power of visibility and public shaming.
- Second, crowd reporting helps break the silence around the daily occurrence of corruption: realising that many other fellow citizens are facing the same issue and are concerned and outraged about the very same challenges has also been identified as a tremendously empowering effect as it helps individuals realise that corruption is a systemic problem in their country or community and not just an isolated individual experience. This tendency to see problems not in their systemic nature but rather from an individual or self-centred fashion is also known in social psychology as the general error of attribution.
- Third, corruption-reporting apps can also help promote collective action. The lack of action against corruption can give rise to the misguided belief that the practice is actually supported or at least tolerated by the majority of their community.

In short, by removing the cover of secrecy, empowering victims of corruption to speak up and showing that a sizeable sector of the population does not approve of or tolerate these practices, reporting apps are supposed to make it harder for corrupt public officials and service providers to extract bribes.

This powerful logic and a few successful initiatives of this kind inspired a surge in initiatives all over the world. However, the scope, target audience and goal of these initiatives can vary significantly: while some provide an open reporting window for any complaints about public services, others focus on particular types of corruption (e.g. bribery) or on specific sectors, institutions or projects. Some of them try to appeal to the general public, but others seek more specific targets such as a specific communities or sectors of the population. Additionally, some define themselves as a complaints mechanism, while others are designed to serve as monitoring tools and some are standalone web applications, while others combine

online and offline reporting mechanisms and activities (Zinnbauer 2015: 4).

The following section provides examples of corruption-reporting apps in different countries. It offers a short overview of the general strategies, goals and objectives of each platform.

2. Examples of corruption-reporting platforms

Many online corruption-reporting initiatives have made headlines over the past few years. While conducting the research for this expert answer, however, it became clear that only a handful of them manage to survive and attract reports after the initial spike in activities that typically accompanies the media attention that comes with their launch. After this period, however, many of these tools go largely dormant or end up disappearing, leaving old media reports and inactive Facebook or Twitter accounts as the only evidence of their existence. This issue has been previously documented by organisations like Transparency International, Ushahidi and the Internews Center for Innovation and Learning (see Bailard et al. 2012 and Zinnbauer 2015).

This section highlights some of the most successful corruption-reporting platforms, but also provides an overview of those that, despite great media buzz, disappeared shortly after their launch.

India: I Paid a Bribe

Without a doubt, one of the most successful and well-known online reporting sites is India's I Paid a Bribe (IPAB). Under www.ipaidabribe.com, users can document first-hand experiences of petty corruption throughout the country. Besides reporting bribes, users can also make an entry under the category of "I Am a Bribe Fighter", which documents instances where a citizen resisted or refused to pay a bribe or "I Met an Honest Officer", which documents instances where a citizen was not asked to pay a bribe by a government official.

IPAB boasts over 112,500 bribery reports with a reported value of around US\$460 million since the website was launched in August 2010. According to their own statistics, IPAB receives between 25 and 50 reports a day, but experiences significant peaks after being featured in the press.

The objectives of the initiative, as explained on its website, is to provide a place for citizens to report

corruption and gather data about petty corruption in India. By doing this, IPAB aims to:

- heighten citizen awareness about the nature and spread of bribe-related exchanges
- promote a purposive public debate that forces public officials to take action against corruption
- help citizens recognise, avoid and tackle bribe-paying situations
- gather data, identify and analyse the trends in bribery to detect corruption-prone public services, suggest possible reforms directed at simplifying bureaucratic processes and making them more transparent

It is important to mention that except for using the data for further analysis, IPAB does not take complaints and stories forward to the authorities, as their main goal is to cooperate with any arm of government to improve their services and reduce the possibility of corruption. As part of the strategy, and to keep their platform from becoming a tool for slander and false reports, IPAB exhorts users not to include their names or the names of those they paid bribes to. They also have software that blanks out names if necessary and a moderator who deletes any defamatory or inflammatory reports.

IPAB has already had some impact on certain policies and regulations in Bangalore. The transport commissioner in Bangalore reached out to the organisation after finding his department on top of the IPAB's bribery list so that they could work together to reduce the incentives for rent-seeking in the issuance of drivers' licences. As a result, two of the procedures previously identified as being highly discretionary were automated.

By analysing the reports it receives, IPAB also detected some interesting patterns in land registration in Bangalore. According to the regulations in place, registering property had to be done in the sub-registrar's office closest to the property. As a result of this policy, offices in the periphery of the city, where most of the new growth and construction is taking place, were seeing the greatest rates of bribes, whereas the sub-registrar offices in the heart of the city, where land transactions are less frequent, had significantly fewer bribes. Having identified this pattern, IPAB suggested that citizens be allowed to register land at any sub-registrar in the city. The result is that bribe rates for land transactions have declined since.

As a result of its achievements, IPAB has been replicated, with various degrees of success, in over

26 countries all around the world, including Greece, Hungary and Serbia in Europe, Mexico and Colombia in the Americas, Morocco, Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe in Africa, and Pakistan and Philippines in Asia.

Lebanon: Sakker el Dekkene

Sakker el Dekkene (SED) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) established in 2013 in Beirut with an objective that greatly resembles that of IPAB in India, i.e.:

- to raise awareness to the human, political and economic costs of corruption
- to pressure public servants to change
- to push for change when there are opportunities for reform

Through their website and smartphone apps, SED has gathered over 2,400 bribery complaints with a value equivalent to US\$2.5 million over the past two years. The organisation has more than 28,000 followers on Facebook and almost 4,000 on Twitter and, just like IPAB, receives daily bribery reports.

It is important to mention that the corruption-reporting platform, while being a prominent element of the SED website, is not the organisation's only anti-corruption strategy. Over the past two years, SED has combined "online and offline" initiatives to raise corruption awareness in the country and create incentives for change. The organisation has also found creative ways to put the data they collect to good use. The Dekkene delivery car, for example, is used as a mobile drop box and is parked in front of the most corrupt public office according to the SED data as a means to put pressure on the authorities and gather more information.

The success and media attention gathered by SED's corruption-reporting platform was used as a stepping stone to strengthen and deepen the organisation's commitment to fight corruption in Lebanon. While the app and bribery mapping exercise is still a prominent feature of the organisation, the organisation has evolved to deal with other challenges such as grand corruption. In response to the number of high-profile cases being reported to SED through their hotline, the organisation launched Dekkene Leaks, a tool that gives whistle-blowers the option to discreetly and anonymously reveal information if they do not wish to talk over the phone. In their 2015 annual report, SED mentions four major high-profile cases of corruption uncovered thanks to Dekkene Leaks, all accompanied with documentation and proof. The

whistleblowing cases refer to corruption in the Ministry of Public Works, customs and waste management.

As mentioned before, SED is more than a simple corruption-reporting platform. It has also participated in anti-corruption mobilisations, diagnosed areas prone to corruption through surveys, investigated corruption in different sectors, pushed ministers to declare their assets and even cooperated with public offices such as the Ministry of Economy to work towards a complete reform. SED has already achieved some important milestones and its efforts to combat corruption has already shown some results. Its impact seems to rest, however, on the good use of technology to support its other initiatives and not vice-versa (SED 2014; SED 2015).

Romania: Bribe Market

Bribe Market (www.piatadespaga.ro) is a Romanian project that also encourages individuals to use their mobile phones to share reports of bribes paid. The platform enables citizens to report the place where they did or did not have to pay a bribe and the amounts they paid. Users are also able to rank their level of satisfaction with the service received in return for their bribe.

Although similar in nature to IPAB and SED, this project simply sees itself as an information tool that can tell people what the right market price is in different institutions and cities. They do this by aggregating the results of the reported institution, city and area in order to tell people where, when and how much others have paid for similar services. It also ranks service providers so that people can find the “cheapest provider”, i.e. one that requests the smallest bribes or no bribes at all.

A core difference between Bribe Market and the platforms listed before, is that it does not intend to conduct any kind of advocacy with the information it collects because it does not want to be seen as political due to fears that Romanians would abstain from participating if that were the case (IACC 2012). Instead of basing their strategy on advocacy, Bribe Market conducted research to identify the target demographic that would be most likely to participate in such a project.

Moreover, instead of encouraging people to report bribery to fight corruption and change the system, this website encourages participation by appealing to peoples’ self-interest: their wish to find service providers that request the smallest bribes or no bribes at all (IACC 2012).

As of November 2016, this website had collected a total of 1,311 bribery reports, but the rate at which reports flow has decreased significantly since the project was launched: almost 50% of the reports were submitted within the first five months of the creation of the portal in 2011.

Russia: Bribr

As previously mentioned, not every reporting platform manages to attract reports after the media buzz and initial excitement dies. Bribr, for example, was released in September 2012 and gave users the chance to report bribes anonymously. Just like IPAB and SED, each report included the place where the bribe occurred, the amount paid, the institution to which it was paid and also for which purpose. The information submitted through the application was collected on [the initiative’s website](#) and compiled into a crowd-mapping platform that aggregated all reports into general statistics, showing the total amount paid in bribes as well as the most common reasons for bribery.

Bribr aimed to change people’s attitudes towards bribery in Russia, and the team behind it had plans to expand coverage and develop some “offline” campaigns as well. The app received support from some political activists and TV personalities and was downloaded over 20,000 times in just two weeks. The app managed to quickly collect reports that revealed a total of €125,000 paid in bribes. The initiative, however, was short lived: the Bribr website is no longer online, the Facebook page only has 135 followers and the latest post dates back to June 2013.

Neither the website, nor the Facebook page offer any explanation regarding the fate of the initiative. In an interview with the Moscow News, however, Elena Panfilova, director of Transparency International’s Russian chapter, expressed her scepticism about the app. According to Panfilova, the app catered only to a small percentage of Russians, i.e. young, middle-class individuals in urban areas. She also explained that the lack of smartphone penetration in certain areas of the country represented a problem for the impact of the initiative as the app would fail to have a widespread effect on corruption or bribery (ERCAS 2012).

Cambodia: Bribespot

Originally a Lithuanian initiative, Bribespot was adapted to a number of countries with different degrees of success. In 2014, the Cambodian chapter of Transparency International launched the Cambodian version of the app. The organisation

hoped that, given the high incidence of bribery in the country, the initiative would motivate citizens to report corruption.

Bribespot's main goal was to provide citizens that did not know where or how to report bribery with an easy-to-use portal to do so and give a voice to those citizens who would like to report corruption but were afraid of the consequences by keeping the reports anonymous. Bribespot could be downloaded on iPhones and Android phones as an app, but reports could also be filed directly on the website (www.bribespot.com). The service allows users to point to their location on a map, report the institution to which they paid a bribe plus the amount and purpose of the payment. In line with most of the other reporting platforms described here, Bribespot also exhorts citizens not to include any names or identifiers.

For the specific case of Cambodia, the app only managed to collect 40 bribe reports in the course of a year. This was despite having invested in a Facebook ad campaign that reached over 130,000 people and survey evidence showing that 99% of Bribespot's target audience in Cambodia (18 to 30 year olds) labelled corruption as a major barrier to national development and another 67% of respondents in the country claiming that they would report corruption if they encountered it (Transparency International 2013).

When asked about the reasons why the app failed to attract attention, the team responsible for the project revealed that smartphone penetration in Cambodia was not as good as it should be. They also accepted that a better ad campaign would have helped "getting the word out". One of the most notable issues, however, seemed to be that Bribespot underestimated the fact that bribery is so common in Cambodia that when "most people when they pay a bribe, they don't even realise that it is a bribe. They don't know about the law, and how much they have to pay officials in particular situations". (Fitch Little 2015).

3. Common challenges

Despite the academic consensus that ICTs present a great opportunity to help fight corruption, the effectiveness of bribery-reporting platforms has not yet been systematically studied. Moreover, while the mechanisms through which these platforms are expected to help fight corruption are often grounded in theory and academic research, empirical evidence shows that only a small amount of these initiatives reach the expected levels of success. In fact, these platforms manage to survive

and effect change far less often than one might hypothesise. This section outlines some of the most common challenges and pitfalls faced by these initiatives:

Quality and reliability of results

Regardless of the number of reports channelled through a corruption-reporting platform, it is always important to note that the data gathered through them needs to be treated with caution. A known weakness of these platforms is that they do not paint an objective picture of petty corruption in the community or country where they are being used. This is due to the fact that online reporting apps are usually used by a specific sector of the population, i.e. young, technologically savvy individuals, and are often not accessible to the people who suffer most from the effects of bribery, i.e. the poor and people in rural communities without access to the internet (IACC 2012). As a result, the analysis of the reports obtained will most likely be skewed towards the experiences of more technologically savvy citizens.

Reaching a critical mass of users

The high number of reporting platforms that fail to survive once the media attention and initial publicity fades away attests that engaging citizens is no easy task. Being featured in the media often generates a spike in incoming reports, but once the platform stops being featured, citizens seem to forget about it. This risk seems to be widespread: for every online corruption-reporting portal that succeeds, a number of them have failed. Moreover, IPAB, Bribe Market and SED seem to be the exceptions, while the fate of Russia's Bribr and Bribespot in Cambodia represent the norm. Even sister platforms of IPAB have fallen into disuse or were never launched despite being announced on the main IPAB website.

Increasing the audience of the platform

Reaching a critical mass of users can be difficult for corruption-reporting platforms. However, even consolidated platforms, such as IPAB, SED and Bribe Market, might find it difficult to increase their presence and number of users. Given the anonymous nature of many reports, it is difficult to know if the platform reaches new people as or is simply being used by citizens who are already engaged in civic issues (IACC 2012). This presents a trade-off: when participants are anonymous, an initiative cannot systematically follow up with them to learn about the impact of participation while, at

the same time, being able to report anonymously is a key feature for many of these platforms.

Lack of feedback loops

Many corruption-reporting platforms are created as standalone projects to collect data about petty corruption. However, as Peixoto and Fox (2016) argue, this might be a disincentive for citizens to report bribes as citizens are more likely to report if they are likely to receive feedback regarding their complaint. Conversely, a lack of feedback is likely to discourage citizen reports.

Measuring impact

Failing to achieve the impressive number of reports gathered by IPAB in India might seem as a disappointment. However, there is not necessarily a correlation between the quantity of collected reports and the impact of the platform. Therefore, the metrics for assessing impact should vary according to the platform's theory of change (IACC 2012). Macedonia's Report Corruption (www.transparency-watch.org), for example, has received only 260 reports since 2011. Each report, however, is verified and becomes part of a campaign to empower citizens and change institutional behaviour. Measuring the impact of this platform solely based on the number of reports received would fail to capture the impact of the project (IACC 2012).

Adapting to the local context

As shown by the unsuccessful attempts to replicate IPAB in other countries, the decision to engage in advocacy with data should be informed by a close analysis of context and resources (IACC 2012). As mentioned above, Bribe Market in Romania decided not to advocate for official response to any reports that it received for fear of being perceived as political, which would dissuade citizens from participating.

4. Lessons learned

Due to the small number of successful reporting platforms and the fact that the unsuccessful ones tend to disappear without leaving any traces or evidence of why they were condemned to oblivion, it is not possible at this time to identify a set of "best practices" for corruption-reporting platforms. More research is thus needed to single out the features that make IPAB, SED or Bribe Market so successful in their countries, but difficult to replicate elsewhere.

Moreover, the case studies briefly outlined above might provide some insights on designing and developing new initiatives, but their utility is limited: the effectiveness, impact and appropriateness of web and mobile-supported initiatives are ultimately determined by contextual factors and therefore no "cookie cutter" solution exists (IACC 2012). As with any other anti-corruption policy, advocates designing new initiatives need to be aware of the opportunities and constraints that might affect the use of technology to empower an initiative. For this reason, tactics that have worked elsewhere, such as IPAB in India, will not make sense in a different context.

There are, however, a few elements that can help make a corruption crowdsourcing platform more successful. As summarised by Zinnbauer (2015) and illustrated by some of the examples above, the following strategies could contribute to the success of crowd-reporting platforms. His proposals include:

- highlighting action options on what to do to help tackle corruption
- profiling success stories on how reporting had a specific impact, how people effectively resisted corruption, or made a difference in fighting it
- moving beyond negative reporting and adding a more symmetric positive rating system to also showcase the prevalence of integrity.

Another promising strategy can be to move away from a simple reporting mechanism to an accountability and citizen-government conversation tool that encourages public officials to provide feedback on complaints, and highlight remedial action that has been taken and cases that have been resolved (Zinnbauer 2015). Fix My Street (www.fixmystreet.com) in the United Kingdom and See Click Fix (www.seeclickfix.com) in the United States, for example, put a strong emphasis on this type of two-way communication facility.

Understanding why IPAB was successful in India despite a relatively low internet and smartphone penetration (the service is only available to 6% of the Indian population) but failed in other countries with similar conditions and characteristics is still an area that requires further research. In one of the few academic papers dealing with this issue, Ang (2014), compares IPAB India to similar websites in China and concludes that there are several reasons that led to the demise of the Chinese platforms:

- Institutional factors: due to the restrictions placed against autonomous NGOs and free association, China lacks autonomous and professional NGOs able to translate online activism into constructive policy engagement and public education.
- Internal organisation: Chinese portals were plagued with issues of mismanagement, opportunism and narrow anti-corruption goals, which were comparatively absent in India.
- Theory of change: instead of trying to address bribery as a systemic problem, which is the original mission of IPAB in India, the Chinese counterparts focused on exposing corrupt individuals, echoing the state's own rhetoric of corruption as a problem of bad agents, rather than of structural political and economic factors. This led to issues of abuse and false reporting as personal vengeance.
- Funding issues: the lack of sustainable funding sources was also an issue of China's IPAB spin-off. In India, the organisation in charge of the IPAB website is funded by individual and institutional donors, including charitable foundations, the United Nations Development Programme, and companies like Dell and Google. The organisation also makes sure that its annual financial reports are posted online for the public to view. This has helped ensure sponsorship. In contrast, the Chinese websites were largely self-funded by individual webmasters who lacked formal fund-raising strategies. One organiser claimed to have spent about 10,000 yuan (US\$1,458) of his own funds to start a site, another major site survived on cash donations from a group of 30 citizens and another one was compelled to ask for posting fees or use reports to generate popularity for advertising revenue.

Although the Chinese regime was also an important factor in determining the fate of the bribery-reporting platforms in China, Ang (2014) highlights that the factors listed above had already managed to delegitimise these platforms and reduce the people's trust. For that reason, the well-documented Chinese experience might offer a few lessons for similar platforms all around the world.

Finally, it is necessary to keep in mind that technology does not replace a solid, evidence-based anti-corruption strategy, it simply expands the reach of previously tested tactics by adding new tools to the mix. Individuals, groups or organisations designing new initiatives should also keep in mind other methods to promote social accountability, such as citizen report cards and community scorecards (IACC 2012).

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Fix My Street
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I Paid A Bribe
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Report Corruption
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Sakker el Dekkene
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