

## Policy Brief

Caryn Peiffer, January 2017

# Do anticorruption messages work? Emerging findings and their relevance for Papua New Guinea

### Key points

#### Anticorruption awareness raising

- Recent scholarship has suggested that campaigns to raise awareness about corruption to inspire citizens to fight it may actually backfire. By heightening people's worries about corruption, awareness-raising messages may make them feel overwhelmed by the problem and discourage them from reporting corruption they encounter.
- A survey experiment in Jakarta has shown that even positive messages – about anticorruption successes or how easily citizens can report corruption – can reduce citizens' belief that they can easily join the fight against it.

#### The PNG context

- If awareness-raising efforts *are* effective, they may inspire people to target those acts they see as most corrupt, but these may not be the ones – such as bribery or fraud – that anticorruption campaigners hope to target.
- For the many Papua New Guineans who lack trust in their government's ability and willingness to fight corruption, awareness-raising messages are unlikely to inspire them to report it.
- Given that the majority of PNG citizens think their government is corrupt, awareness-raising messages may backfire by prompting them to recall this preconceived notion.
- A survey experiment in Port Moresby will shed more light on these potential risks by examining whether and how different awareness-raising messages influence Papua New Guineans' perceptions of corruption and the fight against it.

Most anticorruption programs now include awareness raising about corruption and about efforts to tackle it, but there is little evidence available to tell us how effective these messages are. This brief summarises what we know from research so far, and discusses the potential impact of anticorruption messages in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

#### Raising awareness – hopes and fears

Raising awareness about corruption and anticorruption efforts is seen by many as important to persuade ordinary citizens to fight corruption. The thinking is that anticorruption messages – shared via billboards, posters, or television programs, for example – will inspire citizens to refuse to pay bribes and to report any corruption they encounter (Peiffer & Alvarez, 2016).

Those who argue for greater transparency as a corruption-fighting measure similarly assume that citizens will disapprove of the corrupt acts revealed and will therefore be willing to join in with efforts to hold corrupt officials accountable (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014).

However, these hopes have been increasingly challenged. Some authors argue that when people think corruption is widespread, they may become overwhelmed by the problem and sceptical that it can and/or will ever be effectively tackled. They may therefore see little point in reporting it.

For example, Peiffer and Alvarez (2016) find that, in non-OECD countries, the perception that corruption is widespread tends to reduce people's willingness to fight it. (See also Persson, Rothstein & Teorell (2013); Mungiu-Pippidi, 2011; Bauhr & Nasiritousi, 2011; Rothstein, 2011.)

This suggests that awareness-raising messages could actually backfire; heightening awareness that corruption is widespread may reduce citizens' willingness to get involved in fighting it – and might even encourage them to engage in it.

## Evidence gap

Unfortunately, only a handful of scholars have researched how messages about corruption or anticorruption efforts influence behaviour. Most such studies have looked at voting, and whether citizens are likely to punish corrupt politicians at the polls.

This author's search of the published literature did not find any research that focused on whether messages about corruption influenced reporting. This is consistent with the findings of Johnson, Taxell and Zaum (2012: 28) whose then exhaustive review of research on the effectiveness of anticorruption programming also failed to unearth a single study that focused on the effectiveness of awareness-raising campaigns.

## Insights from Jakarta

To help address this gap in research, a study in Indonesia (Peiffer, forthcoming 2017) explored whether and how anti-corruption messaging influences people's willingness to report corruption. This 2015 survey experiment of 1,000 Jakarta households randomly assigned respondents to five groups. Each group was asked to read a different awareness-raising message on corruption (except the control group, which did not read any message). All respondents then answered the same questions about their perceptions of corruption, and their willingness to report or otherwise fight it.

Two of the messages had a positive tone: one highlighted government successes in fighting corruption and another emphasised how easily ordinary citizens could report corruption and get involved in the fight against it.

The other two messages were more negative: they focused on high-profile 'grand corruption' scandals and statistics that reflected how widespread the problem of 'petty corruption' is in Indonesia.

The messages were quite influential in shaping respondents' beliefs about corruption and anticorruption. Yet exposure to all of the messages elicited a similar response.

Both 'positive' and 'negative' anticorruption messages heightened respondents' worries about the extent to which corruption was harming development in Indonesia, reduced their pride in the government's efforts to tackle corruption, and, perhaps most importantly, reduced their confidence that ordinary citizens could easily join the fight against corruption.

This last finding is especially surprising, given that the aim of one of the messages was to emphasise how relatively easy it is for ordinary people to report and help tackle corruption. So far, the lesson seems to be that any message about corruption or anticorruption may reduce citizens' sense of having the power to fight corruption.

Of course, this still does not tell us whether the messages do in fact influence people's willingness to report corruption or otherwise engage in anticorruption activism. That, next step, is what the project is currently working on.

## The PNG context – what can be expected of anticorruption awareness campaigns?

Given the general lack of evidence on the topic, it is still difficult to say what impact, if any, awareness-raising messages are likely to have outside Jakarta. But lessons from two fairly recent studies on corruption in PNG are worth considering here.

Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, Walton (2015) showed that Papua New Guineans have many different definitions of 'corruption'. For example, some view it as connected to the state, but many are especially worried about corruption that involves non-state actors, like the private sector. Others may see acts that they view as instances of cultural decay (that do not involve the state or other centres of power) as just as 'corrupt' as acts such as bribery or fraud, for example.

This study showed that some PNG citizens – particularly the poor and otherwise marginalised – do not have a strong understanding of the state and its rules and norms, and that cultural norms and values can colour how people understand corruption and its effects. We should therefore expect that the fight against corruption will also be understood in socio-cultural terms. If awareness-raising messages do inspire people to fight corruption, Papua New Guineans are likely to target those acts that appear most harmful and corrupt to them. While anticorruption campaigners are more concerned with corruption involving the state, some Papua New Guineans may focus on other targets. This means that, if awareness raising does affect people's actions, it may do so in unintended ways.

The second PNG study examined citizens' willingness to report corruption (Walton & Peiffer, 2015). This quantitative study used household-level survey data (2010-2011) to examine whether and to what extent different factors influenced people's willingness to report different types of corrupt acts. One of the study's main findings was that – as we might expect – citizens were less likely to be willing to report corruption if they lacked trust that action would be taken as a result.

This suggests that in PNG awareness-raising messages may be ineffective for those who lack faith in the government's handling of corruption; it is hard to imagine that a new billboard, for example, would inspire people to report corruption if they feel certain that doing so is a waste of time. Unfortunately, a large percentage of PNG's population seem to lack such faith; 38% of the 1,825 respondents in the 2010-11 survey agreed with the statement 'there is no point in reporting corruption because nothing useful will be done about it.'

Finally, the preliminary results from the Jakarta experiment should also serve as a warning for anti-corruption campaigners in PNG. Even positively framed messages reduced confidence in the idea that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption.

What might have caused this surprising result? Several scholars have found that people can be 'motivated processors', which means they tend to discount information that does not fit with perceptions they have already formed (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Taber, Cann & Kucsova, 2009; Meffert et al., 2006; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). So an anticorruption message may prompt people to recall their existing opinion about corruption, which may be that it is an insurmountable problem they cannot hope to change.

The idea that people in PNG might approach information about corruption as motivated processors is worrying. Transparency International PNG's 2015 survey in five provinces showed that 99% of respondents thought corruption was a 'very big' or 'big' problem, and 90% thought it had worsened over the past decade. So exposure to even positive messages about fighting corruption might simply prompt PNG citizens to think about it as a big problem that is getting worse. This could reduce their willingness to act against it.

## Next steps

A new study involving 1,000 household respondents in Port Moresby will build on the Jakarta experiment. It will test whether and how anticorruption messages shape Papua New Guineans' beliefs about corruption in PNG and their own role in fighting it. In addition to a control group, four groups of participants will answer questions after being shown different messages about corruption and anticorruption tailored specifically to the PNG context.

Findings will help inform anticorruption efforts in PNG. If the messages prove to have no impact or to backfire, then resources spent on awareness raising could be redirected. However, if findings indicate that certain messages do inspire people to report corruption, for example, then disseminating those messages could be a promising way forward.

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