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Corruption in Afghanistan

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Corruption is commonly defined as the “abuse of entrusted power for illicit gains”. When someone is in a position of power that allows him or her to make certain decisions on behalf of others, and if these decisions provide gains to individuals or groups that generally accepted rules do not otherwise allow, then corruption is implied. Corruption is not only about action, inaction in certain cases can have the same outcome.

Examples of corrupt inaction that have surfaced in Afghanistan include the policeman who does not record the complaint of a victim in order to protect the powerful local commander; the local police that have sufficient means yet do not patrol certain areas during the night, with the intention of allowing a gang of criminals to operate with impunity.

Corruption also is not limited to the public sector. So, too, was the Kabul Bank leadership that knowingly provided loans to ineligible individuals and companies. Finally, despite how it is often portrayed outside Afghanistan, corruption is not limited to Afghans alone. The head of the international agency who takes money allocated for a development project to enhance the comfort of his or his colleagues’ guesthouses or to pay for the bulletproof vehicle of a minister from whom he expects a favor in return, is committing an act of corruption.

When respondents are asked about the kinds of corruption that affect them personally, Afghans respond with more than 70 types ranging from public administration and elected bodies to private sector, international aid, and the Taliban. While the majority of these responses concern public institutions, one is surprised to find responses such as unemployment, illiteracy, and moral corruption.

These are not corruption per se but are associated with it in the mind of the respondents. This indicates that corruption now covers almost every sector, manifests itself through a variety of forms, practices and activities, is undertaken by a multitude of actors, and has many underlying factors. Widespread corruption in Afghanistan is not cultural. Most Afghans see the present level of corruption as far graver than that of earlier times.

According to a research study, what have changed over the years is the perceived causes of corruption in Afghanistan. Five years ago, in one of the first surveys on corruption, most people stated that corruption existed because civil servants were not paid enough.

This was the argument Afghans commonly used to rationalize why they had to pay bribes in exchange for specific public services, such as obtaining a vehicle registration document, a passport, or a driver's license. The low income level of civil servants was the underlying justification. This was a rationalization popular with government officials as well, even at the highest levels of government. It was as if poverty forced people to commit corruption.

The fallacy in this logic, of course, is that it implies that the well off are not as corrupt as the poor. Moreover, few questioned why corruption was not that high in other periods of Afghan history when poverty was more extreme and Afghanistan was not receiving billions of dollars in international aid. Since the research of five years ago, public perceptions of corruption have changed.