Anti-Corruption Agencies (ACAs): Lessons from International Experience

A presentation by Professor Robert Williams to the Regional Workshop, Amman, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 28 October, 2010

ORIGINS AND HOPES

- The early success of the Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption in the 1970s suggested that ACAs could offer an effective way of reducing corruption.

- In the 1990s much greater international attention and resources were directed to fighting corruption, especially corruption in developing and transitional countries receiving assistance.

- The Hong Kong approach incorporating 3 strategic functions; investigation, prevention and education in a single organisation proved influential and has been widely imitated in developing countries.

- The potential importance of ACAs is shown by the EU's insistence that countries seeking EU membership should create ACAs.

EARLY EXPECTATIONS OF ACAs

Establishing an ACA would;

- Send a strong signal that the government is serious about corruption
- Create a centre for specialised anti-corruption expertise and give a clearer focus to anti-corruption work
- Offer the prospect of a ‘fresh start’ free from the problems of existing institutions
- Ensure greater public credibility, awareness and accountability for anti-corruption efforts
- Facilitate accelerated action against corruption as well as promising greater clarity in measuring progress to combat corruption

LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

- The number of ACAs has greatly increased in the past 15 years without 'successes' comparable to Hong Kong or even Botswana. Operational disappointments have encouraged a more questioning approach to establishing new ACAs.

- Even the success of the Hong Kong agency has been qualified. It has become evident that the special factors and circumstances of Hong Kong make it an exception rather than a suitable role model.

- A consensus has grown that early expectations were too high and that ACAs can only function effectively in defined sets of conditions. Any ACA can be overwhelmed by a deeply corrupt and unsupportive governance environment.

- Experience suggests that ACAs are not panaceas for fighting corruption. But they may make a contribution if they have adequate corruption risk assessments, sufficient resources and powers and clear ways of assessing their effectiveness.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

- It is essential to clarify why an ACA exists or is being proposed. ACAs need clear missions based on the corruption risks and available resources. Otherwise ACAs will be purely reactive and incapable of effective business planning.

- International experience suggests that building more effective ACAs depends on an understanding of what 'gaps' it intends to fill and what specific 'added value' it contributes to anti-corruption work.

- Evidence suggests that, whether embedded or operating independently, ACAs are vulnerable to political interference and control. It is important in their creation and reform to assess both the strength and the limits of political support for the ACA.

- To succeed, an ACAs mission and capacity must be complementary. It follows that ACAs should not attempt to be all-purpose anti-corruption bodies but should identify their most useful role within each country's set of anti-corruption institutions and procedures.