

The Other Pandemic

COVID and the Cost of Corruption

Originally posted to the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission website, September 3, 2020.

In this article Roberto Laver calls the global Church to be a standard bearer for integrity and honesty. He exposes the damaging legacy of corruption in many societies around the world and notes that COVID-19 is amplifying the potential for corruption as large amounts of money change hands in the fight against the virus and its impact. In a response article, we will look at some of the missions implications of Roberto's commentary and call the missions community to help churches combat corruption.

The coronavirus pandemic has taken a drastic human toll, infecting millions and killing hundreds of thousands of people worldwide. This is not only a health crisis but also an economic and social one. Throughout the world, the virus has compelled governments to severe lock downs, causing the most brutal recession in living memory. The impact of the virus, however, is not the same for everyone.

The pandemic is exposing the devastating effects and actual risks of the “other pandemic”: systemic corruption. Often being dismissed as “normal” or simply too “political” or too big to address, systemic corruption has been largely neglected by the Church. However, we cannot afford to ignore this injustice anymore. Systemic corruption (as the institutionalized practice of abuse of power and public trust) has severely crippled the ability of most countries to deal with the health and economic costs of the pandemic. The amount of health care funds lost to graft and embezzlement alone is staggering. Various sources estimate that more than 10 percent of global healthcare spending is reaped by bribery and embezzlement, amounting to losses of more than \$500 billion annually¹. This estimate does not account for other corrupt practices that undermine the access and quality of health services such as pervasive clientelism, cronyism, nepotism and favouritism.

To add insult to injury, the pandemic has served as a perfect setting for increased corruption. Shortage-induced bribery, diversion of emergency response resources, and kickbacks in emergency procurement processes are just a few of the prevalent forms of corruption being manifested during this pandemic. This raises the social, human and economic costs of the crisis, particularly for the most vulnerable of society. Where patients can pay bribes or use personal connections to receive prompt access to care, the most vulnerable are left at the bottom of the waiting list. If bribery and connections are used to circumvent quarantine measures, there is a potential higher infection risk posed

to the overall population, further intensifying the humanitarian crisis.

A recent piece published by Carnegie Endowment put this way:

Corruption is like gasoline poured on the flames of a pandemic. Healthcare systems already debilitated by graft will struggle to address the most basic of needs during the crisis. Citizens who can't afford to pay bribes may be locked out of access to testing and treatment, a problem that would accelerate the virus's spread. Those who can bribe their way out of quarantines will probably do so... And government attempts to convey public health messages are likely to fall flat in places where decades of corruption have deeply undermined trust in the state.²

The pandemic has triggered massive amounts of public spending around the world to deal with its health and associated economic costs. Levels of international financial aid are unprecedented; the IMF alone has already provided about US\$90 billion to help 80 countries deal with the pandemic and has pledged a total of \$250 billion.³ But evidence shows that the effectiveness of this financial aid will be severely weakened in contexts of widespread corruption.⁴ Several reports of fraud and corruption have emerged related to public spending associated with the COVID-19 crisis.⁵

Civil society actors in countries around the world are demanding that there be strong safeguards and accountability for emergency assistance related to COVID-19. In Latin America, thirteen national



Roberto Laver is an international lawyer and international development practitioner with over thirty years of combined professional experience in law and development, non-profit leadership and academia. He began his legal career in Argentina as an associate of an international law firm in Buenos Aires. He now has over three decades of combined experience in multilateral, non-profit, corporate and academic sectors. Roberto has extensive experience in senior management and advisory responsibilities ranging from managing, and advising on, complex World Bank projects to leading a global and ecumenical alliance of faith-based organizations. Core specialties include governance and anti-corruption, rule of law, international development organizations and faith and development. He is recognised as a strong strategic thinker, consensus builder and an honest and enthusiastic leader. Roberto is currently the leader of FIDES (www.fides-intl.org), an NGO for helping engage and equip church leaders and communities in promoting public integrity and fighting corruption.

chapters of Transparency International, the largest anti-corruption NGO in the world, presented specific proposals to mitigate the risk of corruption in public procurement as part of the region's response to the pandemic.⁶ Among these chapters is the Association for a Just Society (Asociación para una Sociedad Justa or ASJ in Spanish), a Christian NGO in Honduras and member of the Faith and Public Integrity Network (FPIN⁷). ASJ, together with many other civil society groups, is actively monitoring the health and other public expenditures being made by its respective country government. ASJ is an inspiring model of engagement of a group of believers in the fight against governmental corruption in their own community.

Corruption, as an expression of profound injustice, should matter to believers, in relation to our own behaviour and witness and to the social order in which we live. The pandemic crisis is a wake-up call for the church, its leaders and all followers of Jesus, that fighting corruption is central to our integral mission. Corruption matters to God immensely.

Corruption destroys a nation (Proverbs 29:4). It is an outright theft of funds, resources, opportunities, hopes and the ability to develop our God-given potential and capacities. It is a cancer with corrosive effects on the political, economic and social development of societies. It is the worst obstacle to alleviating poverty. It is the denial of justice and an obstruction to shalom, the wellbeing of all in society. Furthermore, as the pandemic shows, it is a matter of life and death.

We are all hopeful that an effective vaccine will be promptly developed and equitably distributed for COVID-19. However, no simple vaccine can be developed for this "other pandemic". There is no single panacea against corruption.

For the last three decades, mainstream international organizations, national governments and experts have been promoting and implementing anti-corruption measures. Changes in constitutional structures, new laws on transparency and accountability, and new anti-corruption agencies are some of the most common tools. These reforms are primarily about legal and institutional changes, expecting that these will deliver actual changes in behaviours and shifts in culture. Yet overall, these reforms are not producing a sustainable transformation of societies towards stronger public integrity and lower

corruption. Countless evaluations, corroborated by our lived experiences, tell us there has been little change. Despite decades of reforms, and billions of dollars invested, most countries remain as corrupt or are even worse than before the reforms.

There is a growing realization within the anti-corruption community that fighting corruption is not simply a technocratic endeavour, but one that involves deeper changes in cultural and social norms about how citizens relate to the state and among themselves. Legal and institutional reforms are mediated and conditioned by the prevailing political culture and social norms of societies. In societies where norms of privilege, particularism and favouritism prevail, it is hardly surprising that merely changing formal laws or institutions will have no effect. Worse, as many cases show, these changes may be manipulated and abused to the detriment of those demanding honest public services.

Expert voices are emphasizing that societies need to build stronger cultural or normative constraints against corrupt behaviour. Legal changes are not enough. We need to build cultures of integrity, including values of fairness and honesty, citizen participation and political engagement and social capital.

The Church, its leaders and believers at large, are well positioned to be agents of positive transformation. We need, however, to ask ourselves: How are churches and their leaders modelling and instilling values of public integrity and responsible citizenship? To what extent are churches encouraging collective action to influence the governance structures and practices in society?

Tragically, we must admit that the picture is not very encouraging. Public integrity and corruption are issues virtually absent from pulpits and theological reflection. Professions of faith are not accompanied by attitudes and behaviours of public integrity. We witness too many instances where church leaders and believers are participants in corrupt practices, or passive and indifferent to its presence and devastating effect on communities—particularly on the poorest and less advantaged in society.

We pray that the COVID-19 crisis will prompt us to be a transformed Church actively engaged and committed to help cure the "other pandemic".

Footnotes:

1. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/13/how-global-corruption-threatens-u.s.-pandemic-response-pub-81545>
2. Ibid.

3. <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/COVID-Lending-Tracker>
4. For example, Ebola: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/13/how-global-corruption-threatens-u.s.-pandemic-response-pub-81545> and US relief efforts during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: <https://thefactcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TT-Factsheet-Emergency-Spending-Recommendations-42218.pdf>
5. See: <https://www.occrp.org/en/coronavirus/>
6. <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/coronavirus-sparks-high-risk-of-corruption-across-latin-america>
7. FPIN is a global network of Christians who pursue public integrity work in their local communities, nationally and globally. For further details, see <https://fpinetwork.org/>