U4 BRIEF

Soldiers outside a radio station in Nepal, July 2004.

CORRUPTION IN EMERGENCIES: WHAT ROLE FOR THE MEDIA?

This brief is based on the discussion and recommendations that emerged from a meeting of aid agencies, donors and media experts convened by U4 and NORAD in May 2006. For a more comprehensive report of the meeting, along with other relevant resources, please visit the U4 website at www.U4.no/themes/ces/

As watchdog and whistleblower, the media is a natural ally in efforts to expose, explain, and mitigate corruption's impact on humanitarian aid. In reality, however, the media's ability to meaningfully cover cases of corruption is limited by a number of factors. Editorial pressures push foreign journalists to focus either on humanitarian heroes or headline-grabbing scandals. Local outlets may lack the political or financial independence to undertake objective and thorough investigations. Unbalanced coverage at the outset of a crisis – encouraged by aid agencies eager to attract funds - distorts expectations of what can be delivered and how fast. When problems inevitably emerge, withholding information is a common tactic to avoid more critical exposure. A Danish NGO worker summarised the prevailing approach to journalists' enquiries regarding corruption: 'always tell the truth but not necessarily the full truth'. While understandable, such attitudes ultimately undermine the media's ability to promote greater accountability to both the donor public and the affected population. This U4 brief argues that the media can fulfil its watchdog role and strengthen humanitarian efforts in the process.

Common constraints to sustained and objective reporting on corruption can be summarised as follows:

- Commercial imperatives: headlines focus on the scale of a disaster and the number of casualties it caused. In the aftermath of emergencies, the pressure to generate dramatic stories persists; there are few opportunities for in-depth investigations into allegations of corruption.

- Unfamiliarity among journalists with the humanitarian system: it is widely recognised that the most authoritative and informative coverage of disasters comes from seasoned correspondents who have a firm grasp of the complexities of humanitarian assistance. However, in many cases, reporters dispatched to cover major crises have little experience in either the country affected or with complex aid mechanisms and contribute to a distorted picture of both the emergency and the subsequent response.

Media amnesia in Sri Lanka

On December 26, 2004, Sri Lanka faced the worst human disaster in its modern history. With limited resources, poorly trained and underpaid staff, the local media was thrust into covering the tragedy and keeping the country informed. Given the overwhelming circumstances, it did an admirable job: local radio stations and TV networks dropped regular programming and switched to continuous coverage of the unfolding disaster. However, over the following months, journalists increasingly forgot about those whose lives had been destroyed by the tsunami and reverted to stories about political intrigue, military activity, and big business interests. No newspaper, radio or TV station set up a special tsunami investigation desk. Though the media carried stories about individual incidents of corruption, little effort was made to unpack the problem. Furthermore, there was no sustained coverage of the impact of corruption on conflict-affected individuals. Transparency International, in an analysis of the post-tsunami media coverage, concluded that 'the voiceless were not given a platform to express themselves at all.' *(Amantha Perera, local journalist)*

- Weak, polarized, or biased local media: often, local media infrastructure suffers serious damage during a disaster. Many of the skilled reporters are driven out of the country, and dependence on advertising revenue from powerful entities encourages self-censorship. Low salaries and political pressures breed corruption within the media itself.

- Secrecy on the part of humanitarian agencies, out of concern for the security of their projects, mistrust of the media and a fear of alienating their donors and the public.

Low levels of transparency in Liberia

The opaque nature of many humanitarian assistance programmes makes it extremely difficult for local media to access information about their operations and unveil corrupt practices where they exist. Although many relief agencies hold regular press briefings, these usually focus on public diplomacy. There is usually no mechanism for the local media to access other critical information.

Edetaen Ojo, Director of Media Rights Agenda

OVERCOMING CONSTRAINTS

If the majority of media reports convey the tragedy of the disaster or feel-good stories about the arrival of humanitarian aid, a corruption story – by merit of being unusual – will be prominent and disproportionately damaging. By failing to communicate the true threat of corruption, humanitarian agencies and the media pave the way for a severe reaction when individual cases of corruption are uncovered. Participants noted that the only way for agencies to tackle the threat of unsavoury headlines is to communicate the complexities of aid operations in a more regular and nuanced manner. Donors and agencies, by encouraging responsible and balanced reporting on corruption, can help manage public expectations in the long-run. Already, there are signs that some agencies are moving – willingly or not - towards a more open approach to corruption.

Corruption in Oxfam's Aceh operation

In early 2006, Oxfam discovered losses of $22 000 related to procurement in its post-tsunami Aceh programme. Hoping to pre-empt media criticism as well as set an example of good practice in terms of transparency, the agency issued a press release on its findings. Other agencies in Aceh praised Oxfam's decision; they were grateful that a prevalent problem was finally addressed in the public domain. Oxfam's donors also welcomed its attempt to acknowledge challenges in an open and accountable manner. By all accounts, the international press reported on the story objectively. The local media, however, took a more sensational approach. Observers explained this by pointing to institutional weaknesses – including low capacity to conduct serious investigations – as well as the challenges journalists faced in accessing important information.

The Oxfam case study illustrates how engagement with the media can enable agencies to inform coverage in a positive manner. However, the ideal approach would be even more proactive; recognising the relevance of a strong and independent media to a sustainable relief process and supporting local media to this end. In fact, the right kind of support to local media in emergencies can itself be considered a form of humanitarian aid.

Agencies will be reluctant to endorse this approach without increased confidence in the quality and objectivity of local media actors. There are several viable ways in which donors and humanitarian agencies can promote high standards of reporting (see below). The international media should mentor local colleagues and, for their part, local editors must encourage staff to embark on investigations. As Kunda Dixit, the editor of Nepal Times argued, "Corruption can be a great story. We choose stories that have maximum impact – cases of money not reaching maternity hospitals – to show that corruption can be a matter of life or death."

Principles for media when confronting corruption

- Go beyond the details to expose flaws in system.

- Try to set the agenda for reform and follow up your stories.

- Go after the biggest culprits, but don't treat a story as a one-off when it reflects endemic problems.

- Avoid trivialisation and sensationalism: a sober and authoritative tone provides moral power.

- Investigate basic services, health care and education, because that's where corruption hurts most. Avoid distracting political intrigue and a bias towards coverage of urban areas only.

- Consider cross-border investigations. Where foreign companies or organisations are involved, explore opportunities to collaborate with journalists from that country.

How can donors and agencies promote a positive media role with respect to the control of corruption in emergencies? Participants suggested a three-pronged strategy that includes:

- Increasing the transparency of aid operations by publishing information about funding and expenditures in a timely and accessible manner;

- Confronting corruption proactively and providing information when cases are discovered; and

- Providing direct assistance to local media in emergency contexts.

After assessing the capacity and independence of local media outlets (see the U4 website for guidance on media assessments), donors and agencies on the ground can consider the following models of support to local media:

Media Fund

Donors contribute to a central fund, restricted to media outlets that meet select criteria. A media fund allows donors to provide support indirectly to a variety of projects across different forms of local media.

In Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans, the SCOOP project disbursed grants and established a network to provide editorial and legal assistance to investigative journalists.

Resource Centre

The provision of centralised resources – such as communication and printing facilities – offers an infrastructural base that reduces journalists' financial dependency, thus increasing the independence required to investigate allegations of corruption.

In Liberia, a media centre within the national press union was strengthened in order to provide journalists with better access to internet, facilities for training and meetings, and working space.

Training

The provision of training, in which international journalists can play a vital role, is an opportunity to improve the quality and breadth of reportage, build trust between media and agencies, and increase reporters' understanding of relief operations.

In Darfur, the BBC World Service Trust established a project – primarily to bring needed information to the affected population – which contained an element of training for local journalists. These journalists worked with more experienced producers to provide long-term, continuous coverage of relief operations.

Media Development Organisations

Donors who do not wish to fund media outlets directly have the option of engaging experienced media development organisations to assess what kind of support is required and who is best placed to receive it.

Key media development organisations include International Media Support (www.i-m-s.dk), the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (www.iwpr.net), and BBC World Service Trust (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to donors

- **In each emergency situation, take stock of the following questions and devise a media strategy accordingly:**

  – What are the risks in exposing or failing to expose incidents of corruption?

  – What action can be taken to send a clear message that corruption will not be tolerated and cases will be investigated thoroughly?

  – What measures can be taken to ensure that preparation and risk assessments are not rushed, exposing agencies to greater corruption risks?

  – What action can be taken to publicly support agencies that have decided to confront cases of corruption?

  – What can be done to provide information on the overall picture of corruption, alleviating the risk that one agency will bear disproportionate responsibility if they go public?

- **Make it policy to support agencies confronting corruption**

  Agencies' willingness to confront corruption publicly will depend partly on their confidence that donors will support them. Donors should make it a clear policy to encourage a transparent approach towards corruption. When agencies do proactively address corruption, donors should back them through public statements where appropriate.

- **Ensure information is public and accessible**

  Donors should establish access to information policies for implementing partners and themselves, so that journalists can track allocations of funds, the areas of expenditure and the extent to which the needs of affected communities are met. Donors' own efforts to investigate the extent and causes of corruption should be made public. This will provide the media with a basis for inquiry and help set individual cases of corruption in context to prevent distortion of particular examples.

- **Provide resources for proactive communication**

  An appropriate budget should be earmarked for implementing agencies to operate communications departments that work creatively and openly with the media.

- **Support professional courses for journalists in humanitarian aid**

  Training should be directed to journalists working in crisis-affected countries, including those based in donor countries for international media outlets, to help journalists better understand the complexities of operating in emergency environments.

- **Assist local media in crisis-affected countries**

  Donors should assess the possibilities for integrating support to local media into their emergency response allocations.

Recommendations to humanitarian agencies

- **Resist using the media as a public relations device**

  … by promoting the organisation at the expense of informing the public. As a matter of policy, agencies should acknowledge the validity of external scrutiny and investigations provided that they are conducted in a fair and balanced manner. The Danish Refugee Council in North Caucasus, for example, actively integrates the use of local media and invites journalists to monitor its work.

- **Operate an access to information policy**

  … allowing journalists to trace expenditure and assess the quality and effectiveness of the relief effort. Liaise with other organisations to determine a consistent approach to information disclosure, particularly in cases involving corruption.

- **Build long-term relationships with media partners**

  Ongoing relationships will deepen journalists' understanding of the complexities of emergency operations and the root causes of corruption.

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- **Establish complaints and feedback mechanisms within programmes**

  If beneficiaries do not understand what aid they are entitled to, the risk of corruption increases. Such channels also provide meaningful alternatives to the media for exposing corruption.

Recommendations to local media

- **Develop regular contacts with relief organisations**

  Make efforts to understand and convey the difficulties they face. Where necessary, probe areas of weakness and investigate the causes of corruption and malpractice.

- **Relate local knowledge to particular cases**

  Local media can provide invaluable insights and explanations into how corruption becomes possible and what measures can be taken to limit it.

- **Communicate needs in terms of skills and resources to agencies and donors**

  Be proactive and explore possibilities for financial and technical assistance.

Recommendations to international media

- **Promote specialisation in the field of humanitarian assistance**

  Proper training enables journalists to set individual cases in context, investigate malpractice and explore common, systemic causes of corruption. Demonstrated expertise on the part of the media will encourage cooperation from agencies and donors.

- **Advocate for access to information**

  … regarding relief activities from government bodies, agencies and donors as a basic right of affected citizens.

- **Support local media colleagues**

  … and provide solidarity where local journalists are persecuted or harassed for their reporting on corruption.

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more information on CORRUPTION IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS :

www.U4.no/themes/ces/

- Mapping the risks of corruption in humanitarian action

- Corruption in Emergencies: What role(s) for the media (full workshop report)

- Selected literature on corruption and conflict/disasters

- Selected literature on post-conflict corruption challenges

- Mitigating corruption in emergency procurement (forthcoming November 2006)

U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre
www.U4.no

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