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Impact of Corruption on Food Security in India

John Dalberg Acton, a nineteenth century historian and moralist, is best known for his iconic quote, "(p)ower tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Until recently, this quote was the extent to which most officials would speak about corruption. The word is at best controversial, and at worst, a reason for war. It is a topic of unavoidable hypocrisy, and most would rather look the other way. Nearly a decade ago James Wolfensohn went to the World Bank with concerns about the Bank's participation in corrupt dealings. His concerns were met with reprimand. Though told never to mention the dreaded "c word" again, Wolfensohn followed his conscience, and eventually became the first World Bank president to bring attention the problem of corruption in developing areas.

Though corruption is finally being addressed, the problem is still taboo. Most significantly, the topic is nearly absent from discussions on food security. Sustainable governance is just as important as sustainable economics and agriculture in the fight against hunger. The effects of unsound government can be seen in nations rich and poor, but the effect on developing nations is astounding. Corruption holds back progress and stifles development where it is needed most. The African Development Bank reports that up to 50% of government tax revenues is lost to corruption. The distribution and growing of food is in no way immune to this problem. Corruption distorts markets and deprives citizens of their rights to access and benefits throughout the world.

Understanding and tackling the problem of corruption is a daunting task. It is first necessary to understand the reasons for corruption, and why the public is submissive to it. The root of corruption is greed, and greed has a tendency to trickle down governmental and private institutions. Insufficient pay is often the basis for this. Wealthy leaders frequently pay low salaries to civil servants, who are forced to look for other sources of income. In this way the leader's greed transfers to his bureaucracy. Civil servants of judicial and enforcement sectors are prone to bribing and false representation. The public is forced to accept this system because of a simple question that both the police officer and the citizen paying the bribe must ask themselves: "do I feed my family tonight, or do the honorable thing and starve?"

For families across the world, food is an absolute necessity and, therefore, an easy target for corruption. A famed example occurred in Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The United Nations proceeded to place sanctions on Iraqi oil exports. The president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, responded by refusing UN aid in feeding starving children in Iraq. The president of the country used the eminent death of children of his country as a bargaining tool so he could continue oil sales and the monetary driven war. The corruption did not stop there. An Oil-for-Food program was put in place so that Iraq would have to use revenue from oil sales to feed the poor. Five years later evidence was found that over 1.8 billion dollars was illicitly siphoned from the humanitarian effort, and that most of the food purchased for the poor was unsuitable for human consumption.

Major attention must now be turned to India. It is common knowledge that India and China are countries of incalculable importance to the future. Though for the time being China is at the forefront of economic influence, India's significance is growing at an astounding rate. India has a population growth of over 1.5% annually—an increase of 16 million a year—and will overtake China as the most populous country in the world by 2030. By 2020 India will have more than seventy cities with populations of over one million people. This growing population has many implications.

India is a developing nation. With rapid population growth and modernization, India is experiencing dramatic problems in the areas of education, health, unemployment, and law and order. The vast majority of India's population remains illiterate and impoverished. In order to address these problems, stable governmental and private institutions must be formed and maintained. All efforts to do so are reliant on the transparency of these institutions. Unfortunately, the corruption perceptions index (CPI), a publication of Transparency International, paints an unflattering picture of India. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being highly corrupt, India is ranked at 2.7. This rank falls below China, and deems India as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. This CPI value has also seen little alteration over the years, and shows that the situation is not being addressed sufficiently.

Many steps have been taken in the past to confront the issue of corruption in India. Significant among these efforts is India's Prevention of Corruption Act of 1988. This policy is aimed at dealing harsh convictions to public servants involved in misconduct. This act is written in dramatic form, stating that "(c)orruption is a termite that is eating up the pith of our society, it not only hampers the individual's growth but also the collective growth of our Country." The act also notes the need for proper implementation of the policies in the act, but this essential step has not been reached.

Corruption is intimately tied to the traditions and customs of a society. For this reason it is necessary to consider the plight of the average Indian family, specifically the aspects of life that set families in India apart from those in other countries. To better understand the way corruption affects an Indian family, consider the village of Rattu Bigha. Here it is evident that rural subsistence farmers are severely affected by corruption.

Over 70% of India's population lives in villages like Rattu Bigha. Villagers such as these generally live on small farms, or work for the few landowners of the nearby village. Estimated family size in rural areas is as high as 6.9 members per family. Education for villagers is scarce, and deemed largely unnecessary for positions assigned by an outlawed caste system. Less than 10% of rural children graduate from high school, and less than 20% can read or write more than their first name. These rural poor are subject to the Public Food Distribution System (PDS) for food rations and supplies for farming. A fifth of all Indians live without accessible water, and four fifths without a toilet. Research has shown that more than 80% of villagers live on less than one dollar per day. Three fifths of Indians are dependant on agriculture for their livelihood, many of whom are bound to low value, low productivity activities.

Over a four-day period in Rattu Bigha in August, three villagers died of hunger as reported by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). All three did not receive the public services they were entitled too from PDS. These villagers were members of the "untouchable" class in the Hindu system, which is now referred to by the politically correct as the scheduled caste. The first of the three was Ms. Kunti Devi, her family lived off of the land and the traditional role of basket making. The family had an Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) card issued by the PDS, which classifies them as the some of poorest of villagers in India. Ms. Devi's family was not allowed to use the card because of never being able to register for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). She died of starvation. Another AAY cardholder by the name of Mr. Charitter Dom died on the same day in Rattu Bigha. Mr. Dom's card was authorized by the NREGA, but no record of work was shown on this card, so he was refused rations. His family received 30 dollars of food from the PDS in time for his funeral. The third villager Janardhan Mahto, never received his job card, and therefore had no chance. These events took place in four days, in one village. There are more than 638,365 villages in India.

The irony of this situation is that the country of India is not poor, just its people. The common excuse is that overwhelming population justifies poverty and starvation. P. N. Mari Bhat, a distinguished Indian demographer, notes that this theory is inapplicable to a country with the financial means to solve its problems. The Independent, a British newspaper reports that India has "granaries so swollen with rice

and wheat, 16 million tons of 'buffer stocks' ... that the government is selling it at well below cost, to get rid of the surplus." India is selling grain well below cost, but has 200 million malnourished citizens who cannot effectively access that grain due to corruption.

The Public Food Distribution System or PDS, is renowned as the most corrupt institution in India. In 2007 61% of the households using the PDS claim it is plagued by corruption, and 49% state that corruption has increased in the past year. It is the lack of transparency in this institution that led to the deaths of all three villagers in Rattu Bigha. Caste bias, black marketing, nepotism, and failing local governments significantly corrupt implementation of the PDS. Members of the scheduled caste are far more likely to be turned down by the PDS. In this way food security is neglected due to corruption for many rural families. Simply receiving a ration card is a process infested with bribery.

Other major public programs set up to ensure food security include the Integrated Child Development System (ICDS), and the previously mentioned National Rural Employment Guarantee Act or NREGA. NREGA is an employment scheme with the promise of 100 days of minimum wage labor guaranteed to all. If successful, NREGA would enhance the purchasing power of the rural poor and improve food security, but insufficient funding has left NREGA as another symbol of corruption. As a result, only 10.29% of the over 2 million households registered could get the 100 days of employment. It is the malfunctioning of these and the PDS that are leading to malnutrition and starvation.

Many rural farmers are also unable to secure land for themselves. Many cases have been found of farmers with titles to land being unable to use it due to the influence of the powerful few in the villages. In other scenarios individuals or families will often own large areas of land, on which they employ rural farmers for below minimum wage.

The widespread corruption in India is not, however, due to a lack of free speech as in countries such as China. India has a liberal media led by many newspapers such as the Times of India, and the Hindustan Times. The Times of India website is presently the most visited online newspaper in the world, ahead of the New York Times. Instead of the problem lying with the press, a large amount of blame falls on the Indian judicial system. At present, corrupt dealings are registered under domestic law and must be tried in a special court set up by each state. Many states do not even have such a court, and cases are constantly postponed or removed. Transparency International notes that judicial corruption in India leads to "delays in the disposal of cases, shortage of judges and complex procedures, all of which are exacerbated by a preponderance of new laws." This type of judicial behavior is proof of tolerance towards corruption and the influence of corrupt PDS officials.

The livelihood of subsistence farmers can be greatly improved by lowering their dependency on programs such as the PDS. This may be achieved in many ways, and increased agricultural productivity is an important step. If farmers are able to access land and successfully grow crops, they will sever their ties to corrupt officials and the system of corruption will begin to collapse. Increased subsistence farming productivity should be encouraged through education initiatives. Teaching farmers to grow crops in a sustainable and efficient manner is an essential stage in reforming Indian agriculture and improving food security.

Unfortunately, all efforts to provide education and access to land are futile unless paired with effective administration and new policies. Resolving the problems of corruption is necessary to providing universal access to food, and the solutions will not come easy. The greed that supports corrupt institutions is just as deep-seated as the traditional ideals of the Indian caste system. Many estimates say transparency cannot be attained without decades of devoted work on all levels from communities to international organizations.

Though new and creative solutions must be found as time passes, some initiatives must be put in place immediately to improve food security for the neglected population in India. Many of these initiatives will require the focus and deliberation of the Indian Government. First, an independent investigations unit must be formed by the government to address corruption within NREGA, the ICDS and the PDS. The money for such a program must be produced by reorganizing priorities in India. Less importance should be placed on financing military projects in order to properly fund public services. Secondly, it is necessary for the government to expand the PDS and NREGA so that all demonstrated need is covered. Thirdly, the judicial system in India must be reformed. The government must form state and local courts for the purpose of judging corruption cases. These initiatives will help to provide stability in government institutions and improve food security, but outside assistance is also needed.

Anti-corruption initiatives from organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank will be important factors in removing the scourge of corruption in India, and the rest of the world. The UN should serve as a monitor of actions taken in India, and frequent reports should be made. The World Bank, with its frequent publications, must take steps to make corruption a well-known issue when discussing food security in developing nations. Transparency International, Fair Trade and other international organizations should be encouraged. Local agricultural foundations such as Vandana Shiva's Navdanya group, which work to supply fair pricing, conserve biodiversity, and protect the rights of India's farmers from corrupt institutions may be essential to the success of international efforts.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once said, "(g)ood governance is the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development." These words must not be forgotten when considering food security. Mankind's dependence on food makes the market an unavoidable target for corruption, especially in developing nations. India is soon to be home to more people than any other country, and ensuring that the world's largest democracy is a stable one is essential to future development.

Since India is blessed with a free press, corruption cannot be entirely concealed. In contrast, many nations in the world are far more censored. Corruption has found a home in countries such as Indonesia and those in Sub-Saharan Africa. The same attention given to India in the future must not be denied to these countries. Furthermore governments and organizations must not be blind to corruption within their own ranks. The fight against hunger and corruption must be a worldwide effort of cooperation, not judgment.

In the twentieth century James Wolfensohn changed the way the world thinks about corruption and food security. It is now time to change the way the world acts on these factors. Initiatives must be put in place on all levels of governmental and private institutions to establish good governance, as it is a requisite for obtaining global food security.

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