Considerations for Public Administration about Engaging Citizens to
Enhance Public Accountability and Prevent Corruption in
Developed and Developing Countries

There are many forms of corruption in public administration; it is prevalent in such areas as public procurement, management of public finances, and public reporting. Due to its ubiquitous and multifarious nature, it remains high on the agenda of the United Nations System. Three initiatives to fight corruption in public procurement are reviewed here with particular interest in their enhancement of compliance with the United Nations Convention against Corruption. The programme titles and respective countries are as follows: Electronic Public Procurement (ALBEPS), Albania (2010); ChileCompra, Chile (2007); and the e-Procurement Project, India (2007).

Corruption is a threat to development, democracy, and stability and, as stated by Mr. Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General, it erodes public services and trust in officials. First considerations in addressing this issue should be focused on resources available in the short-term, and the criteria for selecting from them should be based on their potential as catalysts for continued change in the longer-term. Citizen engagement is, therefore, perceived as a resource with great possibility in the fight against corruption.

In the field of public administration, a widely accepted general definition of this debilitating phenomenon is “the illegal use of public office for personal gain.” There are many forms of corruption in public administration; it is prevalent in such areas as public procurement, management of public finances, and public reporting. Due to its ubiquitous and multifarious nature, it remains high on the agenda of the United Nations System. The Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is mandated to assist UN Member States in their
anti-corruption efforts, and the Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) was adopted in the General Assembly, Resolution 54/4,\textsuperscript{ii} to guide strategies for more competently and successfully combating corruption in public institutions. The UNCAC challenges public leaders and their executives to, principally, embrace preventive measures. Corruption is one of the difficult public-sector problems against which citizen engagement is a viable preventive measure; since these activities often include the abuse and misappropriation of tax revenues, they directly impact the quality of life of the population. By demanding accountability from public officials, citizens can impel the formulation of legal and managerial instruments to discourage and impede such practices. Indeed, social and economic development, democratization of public institutions, and political stability are desirable to sustaining the quality of life for the entire world population, whether in developed or developing countries. However, due to far less elasticity in the social, economic, and political environments in developing countries, corruption in public administration can more acutely impact the lives of their citizens than in developed countries.

Citizen engagement has the potential to support the current drive against corruption, first of all because it is structured on the same tripartite resource framework (government, private business and civil society) as formulated by UNODC in its anti-corruption strategies. It has been described as transpiring between public-sector entities and individuals, civil society organizations, and businesses (Villarreal, 2010).\textsuperscript{iii} Villarreal further described the broad spectrum of citizen engagement activities as including public deliberation and negotiation over the shaping of shared values and common priorities to reach agreement on the respective responsibilities, and ways and means of accomplishing
them. Additionally, those activities entail expressing recommendations or complaints, providing guidance to public service, public policy decision-making processes, and assessing the performance of public officials and their institutions. Overseeing compliance with applicable laws and regulations and the use of public resources, and holding public officials accountable are other important applications of civic engagement processes. In recent years, public and private actors have also come to recognize that unilateral responses may not ensure effective and sustainable results in the fight against corruption. Commitment, participation, and cooperation among all sectors of society, including government, civil society, and businesses, are required for a comprehensive anti-corruption approach. Considerations for public administration about engaging citizens to enhance accountability and prevent corruption continue below with particular reference to public procurement.

Public procurement is prone to corruption. To deter this, procurement systems must provide for public monitoring and observation, competitive application processes, objective methods of supplier selection, and transparency. Information and communications technologies (ICTs) enable public-sector engagement with citizens regarding public procurement opportunities. They expedite the delivery of related services, and cater to their participation in public procurement processes. Utilization of ICTs in processes of electronic government contribute to at least five Articles within the UNCAC, as follows: Article 7 – public sector human resources management; Article 8 – codes of conduct for public officials; Article 9 – public procurement and management of public finance; Article 10 – public reporting and dissemination of information; and Article 13 – participation of society. Article 13, in particular, specifies that each state
party should promote social participation in the fight against corruption to raise public awareness regarding its existence, gravity, and threat. In that regard, reference is made here to empirical evidence from documented case studies of three winning initiatives of the United Nations Public Service Awards programme (UNPSA), 2007-2010, from the category “Improving accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in the public service.” The UNPSA is the most prestigious international recognition of excellence and innovation in public service. Each case reflects adherence to Article 13, to some extent. And the functionality of electronic procurement processes in citizen engagement is central to the success of the initiatives.

The three initiatives under review here and their respective countries are as follows: *Electronic Public Procurement (ALBEPS)*, Albania (2010); *ChileCompra*, Chile (2007); and the *e-Procurement Project*, India (2007).

**Corruption of public procurement processes** – Public administration in Albania, Chile, and India faced many similar problems with their public procurement processes, which included: lack of transparency in publishing and evaluating tenders, lack of timely public access to tender documents, corruption scandals, and physical threats to bidders from contractors to suppress competition. The problem of threats arose in a case in India. In the case of Albania, problems compromised economic gain because the processes were not generating the expected revenue, which was attributable to limited public access. Similar economic shortfalls resulted in Chile, from impediments to trade and foreign investment due to non-alliance with international norms.
Raising awareness about corruption – An effective method of raising awareness of corruption was the approval and introduction of a new public law regulating the public procurement processes in Albania. This raised citizens’ awareness of opportunities for engagement in the public procurement processes. The law ensured confidentiality and security to public procurement and attracted positive national and international attention, opening the way for greater interest, participation, and increased revenue. Raising awareness about measures against corruption; free, universal access; and non-discriminatory processes increased competition.

Strengthening citizen engagement and social participation – In each of the above-mentioned countries, citizen engagement and social participation were efficiently supported by the new electronic procurement environment: the public was ensured effective access to information and the ability to contribute to decision-making processes. Security systems provided confidentiality and protection against corrupt practices, thereby respecting the morals, rights, and reputations of citizens. Practical aspects of the process were enhanced by ICT efficiency, yielding more productive and profitable services, in the office of public procurement as well as in related organizations. These developments engendered greater citizen trust in public institutions. Increases in access, engagement, and participation contributed to better informed citizens, closer monitoring of public officials, and enhanced accountability in public administration. Digitization fostered electronic commerce and economic growth in Chile.

Lessons for public administration about citizen engagement, enhancing accountability, and preventing corruption – The cases support the belief that citizen
engagement is positively related to enhancing accountability and preventing corruption in public administration. In addition to the anti-corruption measures discussed above, citizen engagement contributed to social and economic development, democratization of public administration, and stability. With ICTs as the primary facilitator of citizen engagement in public procurement processes, advantages are compounded by improved efficiency, productivity, and savings to tax payers; greater inclusion; and equal business development opportunity for citizens.

Finally, Beyerle and Zunes described civic action - “people power” against corruption as a form of non-violent civic resistance that is historically effective in forcing change. Together with tripartite cooperation this can certainly be considered as an essential mechanism in fighting corruption in public administration.

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1 United Nations Secretary General Mr. Ban Ki-moon December 8, 2010
2 31 October, 2003
3 Villarreal, Roberto (2010) Welcoming remarks and introductory framework to the workshop “Citizens engagement in development management for advancing toward the Millennium Development Goals,” Barcelona, Spain
5 Conference of the States Parties to the United Nations, Convention against Corruption, 28 September 2010