

## *THE IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM OF INFORMATION TO THE ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN*

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Distinguished members of the Media, we are grateful to have you here. According to Peter Eigen, Transparency International founder, "Corruption is a major cause of poverty as well as a barrier to overcoming it; the two scourges feed off each other, locking their populations in a cycle of misery." Corruption is a behavior that damages the common interest of society. Because the poor are the ones who suffer from corruption the most: when public resources are misused, the poor have no access to education, health, employment, etc.

Two days ago, Ghana Integrity Initiative (GII) launched Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index for 2007. The report showed that rich and developed countries, which also have more open governments, were among the high performers, scoring between 5 and 10. In fact, most of these countries have Freedom of Information legislations that really work.

Thus, fighting poverty necessarily involves fighting corruption and fighting corruption necessarily requires transparency and accountability, including making information on public transactions open to the public on whose behalf these transactions are undertaken. The dissemination of information about public affairs and the management of public issues is one of the most frequently-cited anti-corruption measures. Transparency and responsibility generate a mutual trust among citizens and causes anyone who leads an organization or institution to direct relations and management toward the common interest.

Thus, for governance institutions and civil society groups working on transparency and anti-corruption, freedom of information (unfettered access to information) is very essential for them to monitor, expose and root out corruption. These watchdog groups need information to mobilize the citizenry to monitor and help to root out corruption. They need credible information to confront officials engaged in corrupt practices and pressurize them to refund looted public resources and resign and/or compel government to sanction them. These watchdog groups can also pass along such information to journalists, present proof of corrupt dealings to the media and members of the judiciary, and initiate legal action against corrupt officials, where possible. All these activities and actions cannot be possible if these groups do not have access to information and cannot compel public office holders to make relevant information available to them. It is, therefore, clear that a Freedom of Information Act is essential for the fight against corruption. If information can be readily accessed, those in power would obviously fear to commit acts of corruption as they can then be brought to book.

Transparency in the structures and procedures for spending public funds and granting benefits helps prevent corruption by reducing the opportunities for corrupt officials and transactions to remain undetected. Where public scrutiny unravels corruption, various deterrence and control factors, such as criminal, civil and disciplinary liability and loss of political support, come into play.

Moreover, transparency and Freedom of Information may prevent corruption in less direct ways. For example, public scrutiny may generate political pressure to reform overly complex and inefficient bureaucracies, leading to changes that reduce the opportunities for corruption. Transparency enhancing laws, such as a Freedom of Information, serve to educate the population, developing popular expectations of high standards and triggering a negative response when those expectations are not met or when attempts are made to cover up malfeasance.

In Ghana, there are requirements for reporting and feedbacks as well as various checks and balances. The required reports are prepared. The problem is that these reports are kept secret, even where irregularities have been discovered. Thus, supervisors who are required to take action on these reports may just sit on them. It should be possible for civil society to demand access to these reports and demand that action is taken on them.

The purpose of an Assets Declaration Regime is to increase transparency with respect to the incomes and assets of public servants. The assets of public servants must be declared, and any increases accounted for. Such a process deters illicit enrichment from sources, such as bribery, or investments made with inside knowledge. It also ensures that unlawful behaviour is quickly identified and dealt with. This will be effective if accountability institutions and watchdog groups can demand and access the information declared.

To conclude, there is no doubt that a Freedom of Information law is essential for the fight against corruption whether it involves government agencies or private citizens and civil society organizations. Various stakeholders should be able to compel disclosure of relevant public information for relevant investigations into allegations of corruption and other related activities.