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Afrobarometer Media Briefing

How Africans See Corruption

- Contrary to common wisdom, Africans say they perceive less official corruption today than six years ago. This result runs counter to the popular wisdom that corruption in Africa is entrenched and worsening.
- There is little evidence that Africans have a culturally unique understanding of what corruption "is." They think that actions such as channeling development projects to supporters, giving jobs to family members or demanding bribes for service are wrong and should be punished.

These important findings, along with many others, flow from a newly released review of public opinion in twelve African countries between 1999 and 2006 (*Where Is Africa Going? Views From Below*). In three separate rounds of surveys (circa 2000, 2002 and 2005), the Afrobarometer has interviewed over 56,000 African citizens in West (Ghana, Mali and Nigeria) East (Tanzania and Uganda) and Southern Africa (Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe). To our knowledge, this is the very first time that directional trends in African public opinion have ever been measured on a comparable multi-country basis. By 2005, Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in 18 countries, adding Benin, Cape Verde, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique and Senegal (the 2005 surveys are reviewed in a second new publication, *Citizens and the State in Africa*, both available at www.afrobarometer.org).

Defining Corruption

Some analysts argue that corruption has different meanings in different societies and that the international community may define as corrupt actions that merely reflect normal cultural practices of "gift giving" in Africa.

In a specially designed question included in our most recent (2005) round of surveys, we asked respondents about three different potential acts by government officials, and whether they considered the acts "not wrong at all," "wrong but understandable," or "wrong and punishable."

- A solid majority (61 percent) says that a public official who "locates a development project in an area where his friends and supporters lived" is wrong and should be punished. Another 24 percent think that such actions are "wrong, but understandable." Just one in ten (13 percent) say such actions are permissible.
- Respondents are even less willing to accept a public official who "gives a job to someone from his family who does not have adequate qualifications": three-quarters (75 percent) consider this a punishable action.
- And Africans take an equally dim view of officials' demands for "a favour or an additional payment for some service that is part of his job" (75 percent say this is punishable).

Perceptions of Official Corruption

In all three rounds of surveys, we have asked respondents “How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say?” The question refers to a list of officials including members of parliament, officials in the national government, and local government officials.

- Perhaps unexpectedly, we find that perceptions of official corruption are declining, and in many cases sharply so. For each type of official, the proportion of survey respondents seeing widespread official graft are significantly lower in the 2005 round of surveys than in 2000. For example, perception of corruption amongst national government official declined by a full 19 percentage points.¹
- This pattern is reproduced in almost all of the 12 Afrobarometer countries in which we have conducted three surveys. For example, with regard to national officials, only Namibia registers an increase in perceived corruption over time (+10 percentage points). Otherwise, there is a real reduction in perceived corruption in all other countries.

Victimization by Corruption

While many people may believe their leaders are involved in corruption, have they personally encountered corruption in their daily dealings with the state. We asked people in the 2005 survey whether “In the past year, how often (if ever) have you had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour to government officials” in order to obtain a range of services.

Across 18 countries, significantly large proportions of citizens were victimized by state officials in the year leading up to the 2005 surveys.

- One in ten (12 percent) respondents had to use bribery or its equivalent to get a document or permit or to obtain medicines or medical treatment.
- One in ten (11 percent) did so to avoid a problem with the police (such as passing a roadblock).
- Seven percent had to resort to these tactics to get a school placement for a child or to secure access to household services.
- If we exclude those who did not try to obtain the service, the rates of corruption experienced by those who *did* seek it are even higher. Between one-in-five and one-in-ten citizens who actually attempted to obtain an official document (17 percent), medical attention (15 percent), deal with the police (15 percent), get household services (11 percent), or get a child into school (10 percent) were victimized.
- Kenyans, Nigerians and Zimbabweans experience the most corruption. For example, nearly one in three Kenyans (29 percent) had to take extraordinary measures to avoid problems with the police in the past year, as did 22 percent of Nigerians (as well as 21 percent of Zimbabweans).
- Corruption is least rampant in Botswana, Lesotho and Malawi and Cape Verde. In sharp contrast to places like Nigeria and Kenya, across the five service sectors, an average of just 1 percent of Botswana were forced to engage in bribery to meet their needs, as were just 2 percent of Cape Verdians, and 3 percent of Basotho and Malawians.

¹ It is possible that the size of these declines might be influenced by the fact that the question was asked differently in five West and East African countries in the 2000 survey. However, for the seven Southern African countries in which the question was asked consistently over all three rounds, the average decline is still 10 percentage points. In the other five, the average difference between the consistent 2002 and 2005 questions is a statistically significant -6 percentage points.

About the Afrobarometer

The Afrobarometer is an independent, non-partisan survey research project conducted by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and Michigan State University (MSU). Implemented through a network of national research partners, Afrobarometer surveys measure the social, economic and political atmosphere in societies in transition in West, East and Southern Africa. Because it asks a standard set of questions, countries can be systematically compared and trends tracked over time

The findings of Afrobarometer surveys are based on interviews conducted in local languages with randomly selected, nationally representative samples of the adult population. The minimum sample size in any country is 1,200 respondents is plus or minus 3 percentage points (actually 2.8 points) at a confidence level of 95 percent. Note however that the countries included are not fully representative of Africa as a whole. The selection of countries is biased towards the continent's most open societies.

For Questions or Comments on Afrobarometer Results and Surveys

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