The challenges of successfully implementing anti-corruption hotlines

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Effective reporting systems

Effective reporting systems are essential to providing national anti-corruption agencies (ACAs) with a valuable source of information about corrupt practices and other forms of misconduct. Over the past decade, ACAs in Commonwealth Africa have deployed multiple reporting channels to enable the public to voice their concerns about suspected corrupt practices. These include reporting in person, via hotlines (dedicated telephone numbers, sometimes toll-free), by letter, by fax and by email. This paper focuses on the hotlines.

Anti-corruption hotlines provide a key channel for ACAs to receive complaints from individuals who have come into contact with or been victims of corruption. Increasingly, hotlines are being valued as a channel for receiving alleged corruption complaints and as a barometer of the success of anti-corruption efforts. Yet their success in helping to combat corruption is very much dependent on a number of operational, administrative, institutional and political factors.

Recently, many ACAs in Commonwealth Africa have employed hotlines for citizens to report alleged cases of corruption. The increased use of mobile phones and the internet have allowed hotlines to reach an even wider group of citizens. For example, SMS (short message service) numbers that offer free-of-charge messaging or have low user costs have enabled the public to access the hotlines’ services or alert the authorities to corrupt practices. Hotline services offer users multiple reporting channels, either through mobile phones or online telephony (U4 Network, 2006).

What makes a hotline successful?

According to the global NGO Transparency International, there are a number of common success factors that can be identified for the effective operation of hotlines. These

Box 1: The case of Botswana

Botswana’s Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime (DCEC) has several ways in which reports on corruption and related offences can be made to its Report Centre – for example, by phone, email, letter, fax or in person (DCEC, 2011). It also provides a toll-free number that operates only during working hours (from 07.30 to 16.30 Monday to Friday). A call centre is being established to operate 24 hours, but it is not yet fully functional as it is still in the founding stage. Email is the only medium in which the public can report or make a complaint after working hours. This is still ineffective, since complaints warranting immediate response can only be attended to when officers are on duty.

A newly established call centre will boost the issue of receiving reports after hours as it is will be upgraded to run for 24 hours. Nevertheless, despite the reporting services it offers the public, Botswana’s DCEC is still experiencing some challenges in its fight against corruption. Below are some of the challenges hindering the DCEC’s efforts.

• **Shortage of skilled manpower.** The people who receive the reports do not have the hard skills to deal with them.

• **Lack of adequate training opportunities.** The funds available for training and support in this regard are not enough. This is because most experts have to be sourced from outside the country at a cost, while sending officers to international institutions for training is also expensive.

• **Inadequate and outdated equipment.** The pace towards updating and replacing equipment (computers, software, forensic, etc.) is very slow. This then poses a challenge since an institution such as the DCEC has to keep pace with the rapid advancement in technology and effective instruments for receiving reports.

• **Limited opening hours (for receiving reports).** The active fight against corruption takes place only during the stipulated eight-hour working day. Some covert corrupt practices take place at night, and the DCEC is currently unable to attend to those in real time.
broadly fall along operational, administrative, institutional and political lines (Transparency International, 2009).

Operational

For it to function as an effective tool to address corruption, a hotline must both promote its services and set up interfaces for easy public access. ACAs need to regularly publicise their hotlines numbers and services, using posters, TV and radio programmes, the internet and local newspapers.

To increase access to and knowledge of ACA hotlines, it is essential to understand the barriers that users encounter. These may be geographical, technical, economic or socio-cultural (e.g. relating to gender, ethnicity, educational level and language). Yet going local does not necessarily guarantee an increased use or understanding of hotlines. In Kenya, where the ACA and its hotlines have initiated regional operations, a survey of citizens – in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu – revealed that only 33 per cent knew of the hotline’s existence despite a high public awareness of corruption issues and the ACA’s efforts to publicise its services (KACC, 2009).

The use of hotlines by victims and witnesses of corruption is conditioned by the hotline’s own capacity constraints – human, technical and financial.

In terms of resources, adequate and specified funding (i.e. being included as a budgetary line item) is needed to encourage freedom in budgetary decisions and the accountability of the hotline’s operations. However, most of Africa’s ACAs do not have a separate funding line for operating their hotlines.

In terms of technical skills, staff need to have a good knowledge base of the legal issues that they are addressing and should be trained (or have a background) in the evidentiary requirements for investigating cases. They must also know how to protect against acts of bad faith in the reporting process, such as a disgruntled employee making a baseless or false accusation against a co-worker or superior. It is important that all staff operating hotlines receive legal training and sign a code of ethics that governs their work.

Furthermore, appropriate staffing levels can help improve a hotline’s effectiveness and an individual’s use of it. According to South Africa’s Public Service Commission (2002), experience has shown that staff members cannot adequately handle more than eight to ten substantive calls in an eight-hour day. In ACAs in Commonwealth Africa, the number of permanent staff per hotline ranges from zero to nine, with some staffing patterns based on outside official working hours.

Administrative

The level of systematic complaint screening and processing procedures undertaken as part of a hotline’s administration is vital. There is often a lack of clear steps for hotline staff to follow when responding to a complaint. This is coupled with insufficient advice on an individual’s rights and what will happen if an investigation is triggered. When running a hotline, protecting victims and witnesses of corruption poses a special set of concerns related to assurances that the claimants will be insulated from reprisals or negative consequences – from the government or within their workplace or community. This is particularly acute for whistleblower cases, as most countries lack legislation to safeguard individuals who are reporting corruption.

Although reporting anonymously can make following up on cases difficult and increases risks for false complaints, it is generally seen as essential that hotline users are able to withhold their identity. In Kenya, the ACA has set up a ‘virtual’ internet hotline where individuals can anonymously report cases of corruption, in addition to voicing complaints through calls, letters or in person (KACC, 2009).

Once a complaint has been received by the hotline, it is important to set out the process for advancing cases to the point of closure. This can be facilitated by using a data management system to track cases. In Kenya, it is a legal requirement that case monitoring be done.

As part of monitoring efforts, the hotline and/or its host institution should publish reports on their operations. Information includes the number of cases that are referred to investigative authorities (such as the police, prosecutor’s office, auditor or ombudsperson) and their outcomes (e.g. disciplinary action, sanctions and prosecution). Kenya’s Anti-Corruption Commission (KACC) publishes an online annual report of activities, including a statistical summary of all cases and their status (www.kacc.go.ke).

Institutional

The authority to investigate claims will be derived from the mandate of the institution that administers the hotline and its institutional role within the government. Where they have a remit to investigate claims, it is important that hotlines have the commensurate capacity and that the steps for investigation are clearly outlined. In Kenya, the anti-corruption hotline is managed by the Investigations and Asset Tracing Directorate, and any report received by the hotline that requires investigation is passed over to the Directorate’s own investigators. If a criminal act has been committed, however, cases must be passed on to the law enforcement authorities and prosecutor’s office.

Political

It is vital that hotlines are not manipulated and used for purposes other than what they have been designed for – i.e. to allow individuals who have been a witness to or victim of corruption to report an abuse and have an effective means of redressing it.

The experiences of setting up hotlines in Africa highlights the importance of having explicit government support for tackling corruption. In some countries, this commitment has
been mixed — in spite of policies (such as anti-corruption initiatives and freedom of information acts) that would suggest otherwise.

Lack of public trust both in the government’s overall commitment to fighting corruption and the national hotline is an issue in some countries. Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer showed that in 2009 less than 25 per cent of people polled in four African countries, including Kenya, felt that their government was effective at fighting corruption (Global Corruption Barometer, 2009). A credibility gap may also result when the hotline and its home institution do not have the appropriate powers to address the complaints received as politically sensitive cases.

Partnering with a civil society organisation can help to improve the credibility of a hotline, such as contracting the local chapter of Transparency International or enabling youth organisations to run a national anti-corruption hotline.

**Conclusion**

The recommendations provided in Box 2 are vital for tackling deficiencies in all areas of a hotline system. For example, ample budgets and advertising will not improve the service if staff members answering the calls are not properly trained. Even specially designated anti-corruption hotlines might not work if the prevailing levels of political

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**Box 2: How to make a hotline effective**

The ‘effectiveness’ of a government hotline is viewed as a composite function of its operational, administrative, institutional and political dimensions. The recommendations offered below are based on international lessons learned from good practice.

**Operational**

- **Promote public awareness of hotline services.** For countries with low literacy rates, publicity in the local language(s) on community radio and on TV is an important component of the outreach strategy.

- **Create a client-friendly and responsive environment.** This includes having operators and staff that can speak more than one of the main languages in the country; having mechanisms in place for responding to after-hour calls; and having ample staff to respond to the volume of calls received.

- **Ensure staff training.** All staff must have the ability to assess the complaints being raised, to formulate questions to assist the caller and to provide information on a caller’s rights (if the complaint is advanced as a case).

- **Designate specific funding.** Budgets for hotlines should be clearly identified and separated on their own budget line within their agency’s funding.

**Administrative**

- **Protect the rights of sources to remain anonymous and file a report confidentially.** The right to report anonymously is an important consideration but is dependent on national legal frameworks, including whether there are provisions protecting whistleblowers and anonymous complainants.

- **Standardise procedures for handling and processing complaints.** These should include establishing a checklist for screening and advancing complaints.

- **Set clear time limits for responding to queries and complaints.** These should be reasonable given the type of responses needed and should be made known to users.

- **Establish and define in formal and legal terms when a case is considered ‘resolved’ and ‘closed’.** Dimensions to consider when setting this condition are: a country’s applicable legislation; the level of evidence required for a complaint’s ‘permissibility’ before the law; requirements for referring the complaint to other responsible authorities; and the desire of the complainant to pursue the case.

- **Set up data management systems.** These systems should capture information that can be used to monitor the cases and sectors affected, creating a risk map of troubled services or institutions.

- **Regularly publish information on hotline performance.** Basic information in the report should include how many calls were received, what percentage was resolved immediately and the number of calls that required follow-up.

**Institutional**

- **Outline investigative responsibilities.** For hotline staff, this involves knowing what level of evidence is required under the law to trigger an investigation and which powers within the hotline, ministry and government should be notified.

**Political**

- **Promote the hotline’s independence from political or administrative interference.** It is essential that the hotline service is seen as safe and impartial and not at the political favour of anyone or at the mercy of an agency’s directors.

- **Establish linkages with civil society.** Civil society partnerships can enhance credibility and increase levels of trust, as well as improve the performance of the hotline.
will and trust are not adequate. For hotlines to bring the voice of the people closer to an ACA, the phone numbers should be short, simple, easy-to-remember and should work for all telecommunication networks across the country. It is also essential that these recommended features are assessed, addressed and strengthened.

References