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The anatomy of a bribe: how are citizens (like you) fuelling corruption in Guyana?

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Corruption is clearly a priority concern for Guyanese. The 2010 Latin American Public Opinion Poll (LAPOP) conducted by Vanderbilt University in 26 countries, found that 78.5% of the Guyanese surveyed perceived corruption to be high, thereby placing the country in the upper tier along with Jamaica and Peru. Most of the discussion on corruption in Guyana has centred on the actions of public officials and public institutions, for example, the inexplicable wealth of government employees, the questionable awarding of contracts etc. In these scenarios, the citizen does not participate, the act happens behind closed doors, involves multi-million dollar sums and the powerful members of our society.

However, one of the most common forms of corruption

to which most people have been directly involved is petty bribery. Bribery appears to be an act of corruption to which Guyanese are more tolerant. In the same LAPOP study, 32.3% of Guyanese responded positively to the statement, "Given the way things are, sometimes paying a bribe is justified". This response placed Guyana as the highest of any other country in Latin America and the Caribbean where the population is amenable to bribery. The deconstruction of an act of petty bribery offers some insight into both the mechanics of corruption and the role and responsibilities of citizens in anti-corruption efforts.

Irrespective of the motivation to pay a bribe whether it is to avoid a traffic fine, to get a birth certificate quickly, or to have a public utility made available, two dominant forces are at work: a corrupt official and a victim or compliant briber. By extension, these two actors are representative of an inefficient and unregulated public institution and a weak citizenry and civil society. The corrupt public official represents only half of the equation. Citizens, and in particular those who are not under duress to pay a bribe are increasingly willing to fuel corruption with bribes. This article does not focus on what the Guyanese government needs to do for its citizens, but asks what are citizens themselves doing to eradicate corruption in Guyana.

In 2000, Peruvian Economist Herando de Soto wrote a ground breaking book titled the Mystery of Capital. De Soto's work explored the nature of capitalism in the developing world and the need for property rights to unleash the potential of the poor to generate capital. One of the most powerful aspects of the book is in De Soto's meticulous analysis of the "red tape" that stands between a small business and a service. For example, De Soto and his research team spent six hours a day for 298 days to complete the necessary paper work to establish a small garment shop in Peru. It is an example that most Guyanese can relate to, because it is exactly this type of inconvenience: the implication of not having the service/document, the wasting of time and the frustration that creates the conditions for petty bribery to flourish. Better to "leave a lunch money," or "buy a drink for the boys".

Although there is little research done on how big the problem is in Guyana, these seemingly innocuous acts of petty bribery further strengthen the creation of a culture of corruption. For example, South Africa's 2011 Victims of Crime Survey of 29, 754 households found that "more than half (52.8 percent) of those who were victims of corruption were asked to pay a bribe to a traffic official to avoid traffic fines. In South Africa, the top government sectors where bribing takes place are the traffic departments, police, social services, housing and home affairs." Similarly, the 2010 India Corruption and Bribery Report found that 91% of bribery demands originated from government officials of which the majority were from national level government

officials (33%) and the police (30%). Bribery in some countries is seen as perfectly acceptable and overlooked as being part of doing business – a transactional cost behind closed doors.

At least that was until the realization of how debilitating these forms of corruption are having on the socio-economic development of countries.

Bribery is not an acceptable act; it is a criminal offence. Every time a citizen agrees to pay a bribe or an official accepts one – it directly undermines Guyana's development and contributes to the "corrupt society" that everyone despises. Standing on the other side of a corrupt official is you, the citizen, who tolerates corruption by handing over their money albeit grudgingly. A decision to pay a bribe, unless under force or duress, is an endorsement of a corrupt system. Bribery often boils down to a very quick transaction in which one person demands a bribe and another makes a conscious decision to honour that demand and pay the money – instead of the alternative.

Because of the lack of research and data, there is only anecdotal evidence to suggest that there is now a deeply ingrained, structured and informal system of bribes for services in Guyana. Most Guyanese know, or have a good sense of how much they have to pay to avoid a traffic fine, how much its costs to get a driver's licence illegally, or to fast track the clearance of items at customs. The image of a corrupt official, who demands a bribe, is at risk of being replaced by a much more routine and systematized transaction involving a passive citizen who instinctively hands over cash irrespective of whether it is demanded or not.

The risk is that in such a scenario, corrupt officials will act with impunity, become emboldened and very rich in the process. The corrupt official can almost routinely acquire an additional income that is as regular as a salary. S/he therefore has the means to fuel a burgeoning acquisitive nature, which then requires more and more money. In turn, the official will place the squeeze on the rich and the poor, the willing and the unwilling.

Because the status quo works very well for the corrupt official there is no incentive to change it, to be efficient or honest in his/her work and every reason to find new and creative ways to ensure that they can increase their wealth base. As this occurs, systems are derailed or fail, corruption becomes more entrenched and difficult to address and Guyana becomes more unlivable.

Corruption is a great leveler – irrespective of your race, political persuasion or wealth, we will all pay the price for the monster that we have had a hand in creating. The state, civil society, the private sector and citizens all have a key role to play. Civil society groups in particular have complemented anti-bribery legislation and programmes by keeping a vigilant eye on corruption. Janaagraha (an Indian NGO) has a powerful online portal "I Paid a Bribe" which allows the public to use multiple media (email, phone, sms etc) to register incidents and then aggregates the data to monitor and detect corruption within the government. How do we eradicate corruption in Guyana – simple, start with yourself!

For more information on the LAPOP visit www.AmericasBarometer.org.

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