

Tackling Corruption as an Obstacle to Development – as Team Europe

Event report

On 3 March 2023, The Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU held an interactive lunch seminar on **how the EU, its Member States and all Team Europe actors can work better together to tackle corruption as an obstacle to development**. The event coincided with the launching of the latest ECDPM discussion paper [No time like the present to fight corruption: Innovative practice for a wicked development problem](#). After a brief presentation of the report, a panel brought together European stakeholders to discuss the opportunities to strengthen the anti-corruption work of Team Europe.

The event was opened by the welcoming words of Mrs. **Helena Lagerlöf**, Minister Counsellor at the Swedish Permanent Representation, and the [video-message](#) of Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade Mr. **Johan Forssell**, which emphasised the strong negative economic and societal impact of corruption and the need to tackle it as a high priority of the Swedish presidency.

The European commission was represented in the panel by Mrs. **Chiara Adamo** of DG INTPA. Mr. **Klas Rasmusson** of the Swedish development agency Sida, and Dr. **Verena Zoppei** from the German development agency GIZ offered practitioners' perspectives from two EU member states and their innovative efforts to integrate corruption in projects and across development assistance. Dr. **David Jackson** of the U4 Anti-corruption resource centre (Norway) offered additional researcher's perspectives building on experience in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The ECDPM team was represented by Mrs. **Katja Sergejeff** as panellist and Mr. **Martin Ronceray** as moderator of the session.

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ECDPM provided an introduction to the international context on corruption and timeliness of efforts to improve the European approach in light of recent developments in the EU and beyond. Of particular significance was the rather critical [Evaluation of the European Union support to rule of law and anticorruption in partner countries \(2010-2021\)](#) which was published in November 2022. The presentation emphasised the importance of **anti-corruption efforts as a factor of credibility for Europe in the world**, and the present **window of opportunity** to conduct this work. The intervention then proceeded to provide

recommendations on how Team Europe's approach to anti-corruption could be strengthened and made more comprehensive, for instance by bringing together capacities and expertise from different actors and **adopting a new relevant strategic framework**, as well as with guidance on how to **mainstream** harmoniously anti-corruption across development work and beyond. More specifically, **Team Europe Initiatives** give the member an opportunity to speak with one voice with combined political weight while at the same time increasing the ability to tailor programmes to context specific needs.

Several interventions underlined the **worsening global context for democracy promotion and anti-corruption**. For the European Commission, this adverse context was a key reason to undertake a review of efforts in the recent evaluation, alongside the **need to reflect on the EU's unique offer in light of increased competition in the international arena**. Emphasis was placed on the importance of ownership, context analysis, donor coordination and lessons-learning from recent experience such as the limits of international support to Afghanistan so that future efforts could be more sustainable. The Commission's current efforts to **integrate the concern for corruption across different thematic areas** were explained, as well as plans to provide **technical guidance to in-country staff**.

Further presentations stressed the need to **focus on how anti-corruption is conducted** – including the question of how much resources are directed towards this priority, but also and foremost the modalities and the underlying philosophy. The principle of **policy coherence** holds value for addressing corruption because many factors that enable corruption are a matter of other sectors than governance support. **A solid mission statement such as a new framework for the EU to work on anti-corruption would be instrumental in promoting such policy coherence**. Researchers remarked that the lens of mainstreaming is not necessarily always the most conducive, but that it offers the opportunity to **learn from decades of efforts to mainstream gender** with significant resources, for instance under the EU's consecutive Gender Action Plans.

Practitioners recognise the paradox that **while more attention is required for this crucial priority, at the same time it can be more politically savvy and effective to avoid the word anti-corruption** as an entry point, and instead label efforts as geared towards efficiency, value-for-money, accountability, transparency and so on. In a similar spirit, some attention was addressed to distinguishing between primary and secondary – or direct and indirect – support to anti-corruption, as **the cross-cutting nature of corruption also means that it is often best tackled transversally** in sectoral works rather than heads-on in dedicated activities.

The ensuing discussion **challenged Team Europe on how it could be brought to “punch above its weight” in anti-corruption**, as opposed to what the evaluation found to be overall “timid” efforts. Pointers were provided, starting with the need to acknowledge **corruption as a societal multiplier of inequalities** and enabler of further ills which requires dedicated funding, and the importance of **moving away from flawed paradigm of anti-corruption** that seek to simply build capacity to resist, in favour of more holistic approaches that empower those that stand to lose from corruption the most. Such approaches go beyond support to CSOs and towards **institutionalising social**

accountability and collective action. Context analysis, responsiveness and flexibility in programmes were stressed as key factors, as well as the importance in more difficult contexts to **build up relationships awaiting more favourable times and identify ‘pockets’ of room for reform.** The difficulty of working with a ‘do no harm’ principle while at the same time investing a political arena with winners and losers was raised.

Interventions from the floor started by stressing the need to **bring this discussion to sectoral experts beyond governance policy specialists** – a few but not enough health and other human development specialists proved to be in the room. A health specialist insisted on the need to **break with approaches that see human development as a technical issue,** when decisive factors starting with corruption are primarily political. This raised the issue of how to handle **perceptions of anti-corruption efforts destabilising governments in place – or, conversely, being utilised to crack down on opposition.** Specific country experience of failure, instrumentalisation and suspension of efforts provided sobering illustration of the limits of anti-corruption and the **need for practitioners to be empowered to change tack flexibly in response to political developments and further learn from experience.**

Additional contributions from the Team Europe Democracy initiative, German permanent representation and United Nations stressed the roles of multilateral fora, provided further figures on the much-discussed impact of corruption, offered some context on the **diversity of channels of funding that can be – but often aren’t – labelled as (and used for) anti-corruption,** and the potential for use of a diversity of funding instruments. Final interventions stressed the role of making the **business case for anti-corruption** and joining forces in improving Team Europe’s collective approach to corruption, starting with the **opportunity offered by upcoming Council conclusions.**