National Integrity Systems – An evolving approach to anti-corruption policy evaluation

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Tackling corruption has proven to be one of the most intractable policy problems for governments and civil society worldwide. From the past 20 years, it is clear that there are few classes of crime which are so capable of diverting resources and perverting policy on grand and petty scales, yet so intrinsically linked with larger political and economic forces, intertwined with the self-interests of influential social actors, and so interwoven with other social behaviours, both positive and negative. As a consequence, there are few crime problems for which solutions are so systemic and elusive, at the same time.

However, while a rich literature continues to develop on how corruption problems are best diagnosed and measured,¹ far less expert attention has been devoted to how best to evaluate the presumed *answers* to corruption. In particular, only limited attention has been placed on how to evaluate the policy systems, institutions and processes aimed at bolstering corruption's antithesis – *integrity* in the discharge of office, performance of institutions and exercise of public or other entrusted power. This is notwithstanding the obvious importance of understanding why so many anti-corruption efforts seem ineffective, and of identifying what makes for relative success. Overall, anti-corruption research has given much less focus to the origins of 'high-

¹Perhaps the best known corruption measurement tools are Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (TI [1]), the World Bank's Control of Corruption Indicator [2] and Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer [3]. See generally Sampford et al. [4]; Heywood and Rose [5].

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quality institutions', and to which factors may explain 'why some countries have successfully been able to establish institutions that benefit the larger society, while others seem to be more or less stuck with thoroughly corrupt systems of rule' ([6]: 466).

This special issue examines the recent evolution of one of the major anti-corruption governance assessment approaches of the last 20 years: the National Integrity System (NIS) assessments developed by the global anti-corruption NGO, Transparency International. Conceptually, governance and anti-corruption assessment need to be distinguished from corruption measurement, given their focus is not the extent and types of corruption (output) but the existence and functioning of anti-corruption and good governance institutions and rules (input) (June et al. [UNDP], [7–9]). While there are many sector- or issue-specific governance assessments spanning developed and developing countries [10], the National Integrity System approach is one of only a small number of frameworks for comprehensive evaluation of anti-corruption efforts. Moreover, these frameworks vary greatly, and face diverse challenges. While theories of integrity are as old as those of corruption [11], the policy task of assessing how, and how well, the integrity values of a society are being served by its governance raises complex problems, cutting across questions of political culture, political systems, economic development and regulation, institutional design, technical capacity and law. Some evaluation approaches focus on policy assessment, drawing on wider policy effectiveness literature, but tending to presuppose as much as evaluate the roles of the types of advanced democratic institutions found in OECD countries (e.g. [12]). In their recent review of 10 different datasources on corruption and anti-corruption – some issue-specific and some broader – Trapnell and Recanatini [13] show the variations in methodological design, potential for sustainability, accessibility to stakeholders and relevance for reform.

In similar vein, Fig. 1 takes the major, general cross-national assessment methods of which we are aware, and presents these according to main purpose on one hand (i.e. policy/advocacy vs. awareness-raising) and, on the other, the extent to which they are “top down” or centrally driven (e.g. conceived and implemented by global actors) or driven more locally with stakeholders in country. As shown, most are driven by international institutions like the World Bank, Freedom House or the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, and geared towards raising awareness of a given country's main governance challenges, especially to influence how international agencies, including donors, then deal with that country (including by “naming and shaming”). Most of these also produce comparative rankings, relying on quantitative scores derived from a small set of indicators and/or secondary data sources – such as the recently developed Index of Public Integrity [14].

By contrast, the National Integrity System (NIS) approach is more locally-owned and policy-oriented. As noted by Trapnell and Recanatini [13], its focus has been on production of qualitative reports ‘that may vary in quality, but aim to be inclusive and relevant to country context’ hence offering important lessons on how to make data ‘relevant, comprehensible, and usable’. The NIS assessment effort has also been extensive, applied in close to 100 countries since the early 2000s, including more than 45 countries under the refined method

Fig. 1 Some major cross-national governance and anti-corruption assessments

adopted by Transparency International in 2009.² As a result, it has been a valuable pioneer for what was once described by the architects of the World Bank's governance indicators as a possible optimum approach: 'a very detailed country assessment... carried out annually in a very large number of countries, hopefully using a common methodology that would allow the same tool to be used both for within-country diagnostics, as well as cross-country comparisons and high-frequency monitoring' [15]. Indeed, even the first-stage NIS framework became one of the world's best known approaches to understanding and evaluating integrity policies and practices ([16]: 25), described as 'one of the most influential analytic frameworks for anti-corruption' ([17]: 43) and 'fundamental to the development of an anti-corruption discourse' ([18]: 335). Subsequently it has been cited as a logical strategy for identifying the actions needed to properly implement the UN Convention Against Corruption ([19]: 28).

Despite this history, though, only the early phases of the approach have received any significant academic attention ([20, 21, 41]). Indeed, at the design level, the NIS approach has been criticised for having lost its original 'theory of change', instead reverting to something more like an over-broad 'inventory': 'no longer a mixture of [anti-corruption] agents, even of potential agents, but rather a conflation of the problem with the solution with no guiding thread' [42]. So, what has the approach entailed in

² See <https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/nis> for the NIS country assessments conducted since 2009; also listed in Macaulay & Mulcahy, this issue. Another NGO, Integrity Action, turned Pope's concept into an assessment tool which focused on anti-corruption systems in countries undergoing reconstruction, applying it in eight countries between 2005 and 2007 (<http://www.integrityaction.org/network-integrity-reconstruction-nir-resources>).

practice, and what is to be learned from it? A first aim of the papers in this issue is to help fill this gap, and share key lessons from this experience of relevance to all anti-corruption policy evaluation – particularly through critical review of some of the key challenges encountered by the NIS approach since 2009. The results also shed new light on substantive questions of how institutional and policy reforms relate to corruption prevention, resistance and reduction objectives across a wide range of countries. A third aim is to inform further evolution in the NIS approach itself. We begin by briefly reviewing the NIS approach, and the origins of this special issue and each paper.

The National Integrity System approach

The NIS approach dates from the mid-1990s, when many countries began looking for “quick fixes” to corruption perception problems. Transparency International’s inaugural director Jeremy Pope responded that a diversity of holistic, well-embedded reforms was likely to be more important than symbolic one-off responses such as a single new anti-corruption law or agency ([22–24]; see also [25, 26]). Hence the approach sought to be comprehensive from the outset, presenting a picture of anti-corruption systems as relying on a wide range of institutions and actors (so-called “pillars”), all of whose individual strengths, weaknesses and interactions had to be considered, and which were captured in the graphic metaphor of a Greek temple (Fig. 2). As

Fig. 2 The National Integrity System temple. Source: [23]

a result, an ‘integrity system’ came to be understood as meaning ‘the practical effort – based on theoretical insights – to combine law enforcement and motivation in an integrated system of rules, values, guidelines and socialization mechanisms’, based on ‘an understanding of relevant *values*, of corruption-curbing *institutions*, of the *nature of situations* in which corruption is likely to emerge, and of the way in which these three elements *interact* with each other’ ([27]: 266). More recently, the challenge has become not only how to understand integrity systems, but how to test their performance empirically [28, 42].

The most recent NIS methodology (see TI [29]) attempts a holistic diagnostic of the anti-corruption system in a given country, combined with a multi-stakeholder consultation approach intended to maximise the advocacy and policy potential of that diagnostic. Each of the identified institutions or actors (“pillars”) are evaluated by in-country researchers using a set of indicators focusing on ‘(1) their overall capacity, (2) their internal governance systems and procedures, and (3) their role in the overall integrity system’ (TI [29]: 2). In each instance, both law/theory and actual practice are covered. This institutional analysis is situated in a contextualising account of the social, political, economic and cultural “foundations” of the anti-corruption system in that country. While the pillars are dominated by the government and public sector institutions potentially most central to integrity, four non-state pillars are included (business, media, political parties and civil society) – primarily with respect to their role in promoting public integrity, and only fleetingly with respect to integrity risks within these sectors themselves. Consequently, a distinct conceptual framework is needed to assess private sector corruption risks, such as separately developed by TI in the form of a Business Integrity Country Agenda (TI [30]).

Evidence is collected through a combination of desk review and key informant interviews, working under the auspices of the local Transparency International Chapter and guided by a multi-stakeholder advisory group. In addition to this qualitative analysis, the relative strength of each “pillar” on each core dimension is scored via specific indicators, and can then also be presented for visual comparison, as shown in Fig. 3. This visualization is embedded in a qualitative country report which includes a profile of anti-corruption efforts in the country, the context analysis of the NIS foundations, assessment

Fig. 3 National Integrity System results, United Kingdom 2011. Source: [31]

of each pillar, a synthesis of cross-cutting issues, and policy recommendations arising from these analyses, informed by a multi-stakeholder workshop.

The National Integrity System workshop and papers

To learn from the experience amassed by these assessments, the papers in this issue stem from an international workshop convened by Transparency International and Griffith University's Centre for Governance & Public Policy, in Brisbane in June 2014. An initial call for feedback on the experience of the first five years of the latest NIS methodology attracted responses from researchers and TI-based anti-corruption advocates in 24 countries. To examine the key conceptual and methodological challenges identified, the workshop itself assembled 60 anti-corruption experts and advocates from 14 countries (Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Cambodia, Germany, Kenya, Myanmar, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom, United States and Vietnam: see [32]).

Five issues were then selected for deeper treatment in these papers. The workshop also included significant contributions not included here. For example, the papers all draw on seven principles identified by Nikos Passas as fundamental components of any anti-corruption assessment method: (1) good diagnostics of risk and response, (2) a strong focus on substantive objectives (outcomes over outputs, regulation and institutions), (3) conduciveness to strategy, integrated policy-making and actionability, (4) multi-dimensionality, (5) generalizability/comparability, (6) forward-lookingness and (7) transparency and easiness to understand. These principles flowed from a recognition that anti-corruption efforts have come to be characterised by 'too many challenges and institutions', 'too little long-term planning on how to best use available resources... and to achieve synergies', and the general need to help bring strategic thinking 'back in' to anti-corruption policy and its evaluation [33].

The first challenge encountered when taking stock of the NIS approach, is that of understanding the impacts of NIS-type assessments. As noted, from an early stage the NIS approach filled a policy need – but is it filling this need in practice, and if so, how? In the first article, **Mulcahy & Macaulay** review key evidence of the impacts that NIS assessments can have, focusing on those conducted in two so-called 'advanced' democracies: United Kingdom and New Zealand. This choice of countries also demonstrates how the NIS approach applies outside the developing world, helping expose integrity-building opportunities in industrialised and industrialising countries alike, by contrast with approaches that automatically tend to focus on corruption as a developing country problem. Providing further history of the NIS approach, the authors use examples to posit a framework for systematic evaluation of the impacts of NIS assessments, and other related or contrasting approaches; and for more informed choices of which assessment tools are most appropriate for particular purposes.

The second, fundamental challenge is the complexity of achieving cross-country comparability on the one hand, while retaining contextual validity on the other. A problem for most cross-national social research [34], this is especially a challenge when evaluating corruption, its prevention and its responses. While the NIS approach can lend to more useful comparative analysis, as seen below, its primarily qualitative method provides a

testing ground for whether or how multi-country assessments might achieve the ‘context-sensitivity... necessary for the production of policy-relevant data’, given that corruption is ‘inherently a political phenomenon’ [13]. Indeed, for countries characterized by diverse political, social and cultural conditions, the common framework of the NIS “pillars” is not without problems, given their origin in a Western approach to institutions ([17]: 43–44; [35]: 9). Tackling this, **Heywood & Johnson** critically reassess the NIS’ institutionalist focus and ‘travelling capacity’ to non-Western contexts. Using theoretical perspectives and the practical example of the Cambodian NIS assessment, they ask how the approach might evolve to transcend these limitations, and argue that especially in developing country contexts, integrity system evaluations appear to work best when research goes beyond the standard set of institutions, and adapts and adds to the ‘pillars’ to recognise specific cultural challenges and national legacies. They also signpost ways in which institutionally-focused evaluations should adapt to better account for the role of societal and institutional values, in order not to miss ‘important individual-level determinants’ of integrity and corruption.

A third and related challenge, found across the spectrum of country experience, is how an inadequate focus on the values-basis of specific institutions and reforms can confound any assessments – including the NIS approach – based on the neo-institutional approach of building effective systems of checks and balances as an answer to corruption [36, 37]. Particular “anti-corruption” policies and institutions may indeed change the dynamics of power, but either in addition to or in place of enhancing integrity and accountability, they may become vehicles for advancing other, competing or inconsistent values. This dilemma, and how it might be better accounted for when evaluating integrity systems, is broached by **Krajewska & Makowski** drawing on the Poland NIS assessment. Conducted as part of a 25-country European project, this assessment demonstrates the tensions between anti-corruption policies and institutions on one hand, and respect for human, civil and political rights on the other. Rather than being effective vehicles for the integrity values that inspired them, institutions such as Poland’s Central Anti-corruption Bureau may also compromise those values in direct and indirect ways, from simple incompatibility with normal rule-of-law approaches to subversion of their power for ulterior political purposes. The authors show how the NIS methodology should better test for such inconsistent values, recommending indicator questions to help rebalance future assessments.

Fourth, given the NIS’ continuing institutionalist focus, how well is it tackling its core mission of evaluating the capacities, governance and role of the identified institutional actors and processes? Could a stronger comparative element, across jurisdictions, aid analysis of the real relative strength of anti-corruption actors and systems? **Brown & Bruerton** review how the NIS approach has dealt with the first of its three core dimensions – capacity – assessed in terms of financial resourcing of integrity agencies, taking data from NIS studies in Bangladesh, New Zealand and Australia. Exploring the use of comparative benchmarks, they conclude that comparative analysis may indeed be feasible and could play a useful, greater role in the NIS approach, by exposing potential capacity strengths and weaknesses for investigation through more in-depth, qualitative research. As well as pointing to how this might be done, they affirm the ‘system’ approach of the NIS by concluding that greater insights may stem from analyses of resourcing based on related institutions grouped by function, than by trying to compare individual ‘pillars’ on their own.

Fifth and finally in this issue, **Heinrich & Brown** continue this theme by addressing an even more fundamental assumption behind the ‘integrity system’ approach – that it is not simply the combination of institutional actors, but their interactions and relationships that should work to limit and counteract corruption. Yet, the NIS approach has continued to revolve around analysis of each institutional “pillar”. Different conceptual approaches have been suggested (e.g. [38]), but there has been limited effort to understand empirically how institutional relationships may affect an integrity system’s performance, or indeed whether it functions as a ‘system’ at all. By contrast, full systems thinking would look to the presence and role of adaptive systems, feedback loops and non-linear change [39]. Nevertheless, the NIS approach does assess specific roles that different institutions play with respect to other institutions, consistently with the theory of “checks and balances” or horizontal accountability which helped inform the original NIS concept [40]. To test this theory and see if these relationships matter, role performance results are aggregated and compared across 38 different NIS assessments, using quantitative scoring also provided by the different research teams. These provide measures of how well the combination of NIS institutions in each system is delivering both vertical and horizontal accountability, and allows this assessed accountability performance to be related to other possible indicators of success in corruption control. Positive relationships between these measures provide perhaps the first real empirical indications that integrity systems do work *as systems* to enhance accountability and control corruption, and good reason for continuing with systems-based approaches to anti-corruption policy.

Together, these papers have wide-ranging implications for the evolution of approaches to evaluating anti-corruption policies and institutions. The challenges and possible answers are not unique to the NIS approach – rather they are common to any and all policy-focused governance diagnostics in the anti-corruption field, all contending with the competing pressures of academic rigour on the one hand, and policy usefulness on the other. Dealing with, rather than trying to avoid the inherent ‘messiness’ of real-world anti-corruption policy is part of the continuing promise of an NIS-style approach: as Trapnell and Recanatini [13] identify, ‘messy is certainly not the enemy of rigorous, but it does complicate it... it is these kinds of measurement efforts that may be shining a light on the future of corruption measurement.’ Whether or not the NIS approach provides a first or next step towards any kind of “optimum” method, it provides plenty of insights into the methodological and operational challenges which must be overcome if there is to be major development in better cross-national governance assessment methodologies. Through ongoing reflection, including by scholars unfamiliar with the NIS, we hope the investment of time and resources by donors, policymakers and anti-corruption advocates will see its ongoing adaptation as an actionable evaluation framework of enduring significance. More broadly, we hope these insights will stimulate further debates as to how evidence-based cross-national assessment can best contribute to anti-corruption policy and practice, worldwide.

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