

# UK public attitudes towards corruption

How can we talk about corruption without losing support  
for aid and development?



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## About Bond

Bond is the civil society network for global change. We bring people together to make the international development sector more effective. [bond.org.uk](http://bond.org.uk)

## Acknowledgements

This guide is based on data and analysis resulting from the Aid Attitudes Tracker (AAT) and work by David Hudson and Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson from UCL school of public policy.

The AAT is a multi-year longitudinal study of public attitudes on development and aid. The design and analysis is provided by YouGov and UCL. It is driven by eight partner organisations: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, DFID, Bond, Comic Relief, Oxfam, Save the Children, ONE, and VSO.

Thanks go to ONE, CAFOD, Christian Aid and Transparency International who provided their reports to be used as examples in this guide. Many thanks to Transparency International, ONE, David Hudson and Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson who all commented on the draft of this guide.

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## What is corruption?

As defined by Transparency International, corruption is “the abuse of power for private gain”. It can take many forms, including bribery, fraud, money laundering and embezzlement.

## Things you should know

- Corruption is a dominant theme for “swing”<sup>1</sup> audiences when thinking about aid and development. The majority of the UK public believe that aid ends up in the pockets of corrupt politicians overseas.
- The UK public do not see any difference in corruption in the use of overseas aid compared to corruption in any other policy domain in the UK.
- It’s possible to speak out about corruption without reducing support for aid and development.
- The best way to overcome concerns about corruption, and even increase support for development, is to show the public that aid works and that NGOs go to great lengths to minimise corruption.

59% say donating  
to poor countries  
is pointless due to  
**corruption**



1. This audience group believe they have a strong obligation to help people in the world’s poorest places but they can also be led to believe that development programmes are wasteful. For more information look at the Bond public support guide on *Understanding our audiences*. Available from: [https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource-documents/uk\\_public\\_attitudes\\_-\\_understanding\\_our\\_audiences.pdf](https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource-documents/uk_public_attitudes_-_understanding_our_audiences.pdf)

# What do the public think about corruption and aid?

## 1. The public has limited knowledge and understanding of aid and how it is spent

The graphic below shows data from a word exercise carried out with members of the public, exploring the themes and emotions that best sum up participant's thoughts and feelings towards global poverty – corruption is a dominant issue. As David Hudson at UCL notes: "The view that corruption is real and prevalent is a majority view. Everyone seems to accept it, supporters and critics alike. The crucial issue is whether corruption undermines the case for aid or not."

If we want to change public perceptions we need to find effective ways of tackling concerns about corruption and specifically about wasting aid. We need to ensure supporters have the most accurate information and NGOs don't lose their supporters if they chose to tackle the issue of corruption.

### On the fence

This audience group is often turned off by development issues and overseas aid, and prefers to focus on negative stories.

### Inactive supporters

This audience group is supportive of development issues and overseas aid, but is currently not taking action.



## 2. The UK public has very little tolerance for corruption

Attitudes towards aid have hardened since 2006 and tolerance of corrupt acts in relation to aid has fallen. Members of the UK public hold a very moral view on donating money and therefore corruption is not seen as acceptable.

Between 2008 and 2014 there was a 9% increase in the number of people in the UK who believe it is pointless to donate to poor countries due to corruption.<sup>2</sup> Today, 59% of the UK public say that it is pointless sending aid to poor countries for this reason.

*“The money goes over to India and who gets the money then? The government gets it, so what does the government do? It helps itself out first and then it helps its people out.”*

On the Fence supporter (AAT focus group, July 2014)

## 3. There is a high belief among the public that aid is being wasted due to corruption

Along with little tolerance for corruption, in general, the UK public's moral view of donating money extends to how the money is used and where it is potentially wasted.

Between 2008 and 2014 there was a 12.2% increase in the number of people who believe aid to poor countries is wasted.<sup>3</sup> Half of swing audiences believe more than 20% of aid is lost to corruption; the majority of the public say they can tolerate up to 5%.<sup>4</sup>

Swing audiences are open to supporting aid and development, but they are easily persuaded otherwise, and therefore the way in which issues around corruption and waste are communicated is very important.

The gap between perceptions of reality and views on acceptable levels of corruption suggests that the amount of space the sector has to work with in communicating losses to aid without challenging public norms is very small.

## 4. The more engaged the audience, the more favourable they are to supporting aid despite corruption

So long as aid is contributing to economic development, 45% of engaged audiences argue that it should still be distributed to areas where corruption is a problem. However, among disengaged audiences only 22% believed aid should still go to countries where corruption is a problem.



in the number of people who believe aid to poor countries is wasted.

# Why do NGOs need to tackle public concerns of corruption in relation to aid?

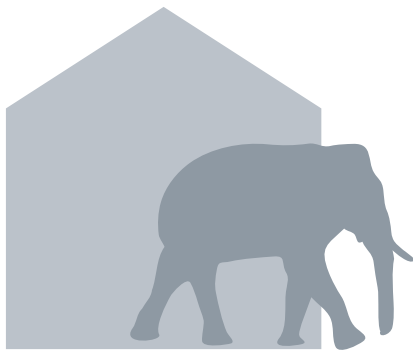
Supporters are increasingly struggling with the complexity of arguments around aid and global poverty, with campaigns around health, education, gender equality and so much more, contributing to information overload.

This makes them more susceptible to fatalistic arguments around the misuse of aid, and the international development sector does not yet have a coherent and clear message to tackle these concerns.

It is estimated that corruption has increased the cost of achieving the UN Millennium Development Goal on water and sanitation by US \$48 billion<sup>5</sup> making it a major development challenge. If advocates for aid stay outside the conversation on corruption, the opposing media will continue to fill the void, and the public will not get to hear the full story.<sup>6</sup>

NGOs working in international development need to start talking about corruption in a way that can effectively counter negative media stories and statistics, in order to maintain public support. We need to stop seeing corruption as the elephant in the room.

By openly discussing corruption, NGOs will exert greater influence over the direction of conversation on aid, helping to sustain and even increase public support – even in instances where corruption is evident.



We need  
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5. Transparency International (2010) The Anti-Corruption Catalyst: Realising the MDGs by 2015, p4. Available from: [http://issuu.com/transparencymagazine/docs/2010\\_mdg\\_en?e=2496456/2052732](http://issuu.com/transparencymagazine/docs/2010_mdg_en?e=2496456/2052732)

6. AAT (2014) Wave 2 Analysis. Available from: [https://my.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/AAT%20Wave%202%20Analysis\\_Sept%202014.pdf](https://my.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/AAT%20Wave%202%20Analysis_Sept%202014.pdf) (Bond members only)

# How can we talk about corruption without losing support for aid and development?

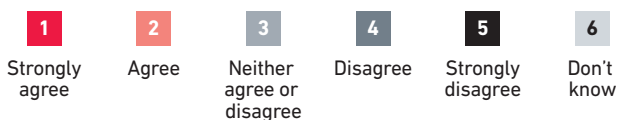
In 2014 David Hudson and Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson at UCL school of public policy conducted an experiment to compare the effect of certain statements on poverty in Kenya with support for aid, including messaging where the following topics were mentioned<sup>7</sup>:

- Bribery
- Double standards
- Aid words
- Donor anti-corruption work
- Partner anti-corruption work
- Illicit financial flows
- CSO/NGO social accounting

All groups, including a control group, got the following information and were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement.

**More than 40% of people in Kenya live below the poverty line and 10,000 children die every year from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water.**

To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should stop giving aid to poor countries like Kenya?



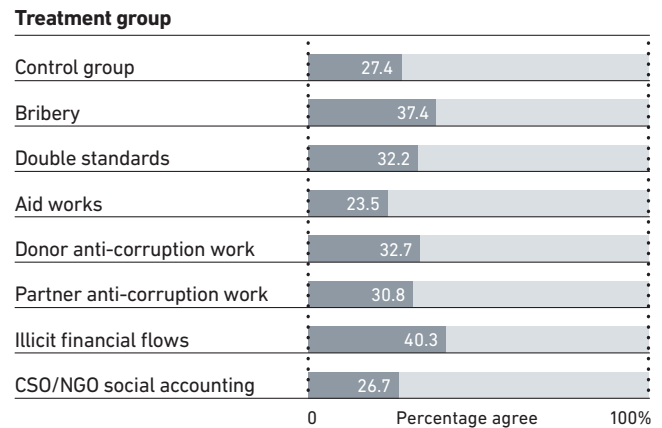
Next, the seven different messages were tested to see which were more successful in overcoming negative perceptions around corruption and aid.

As expected, findings from the research showed that by adding information about bribery and corruption respondents were more likely to agree that we should stop giving overseas aid.

The two strongest performing statements were the ones that identified progress despite corruption and highlighted CSO/NGO activity to tackle corruption.

What do the findings mean for the sector and our messaging?

**To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should stop giving aid to poor countries like Kenya? (control group)**



## 1. Messaging around aid impact and CSO/NGO monitoring can maintain or even increase support for aid and development

Results show that it is possible to effectively counter negative messages about aid waste due to corruption without reducing public support. It is even possible to communicate corruption in the context of aid delivery and increase support through using both aid works and CSO/NGO social accounting messaging.

When using aid works messaging support for giving aid increased by 3.9% compared to the control group, and when using CSO/NGO social accounting messaging, support for aid increased by 0.7%.

7. AAT (2015) Anti-corruption messaging and comms? Available from: [https://my.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/UCL\\_Corruption\\_Final%2019.02.2015.pdf](https://my.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/UCL_Corruption_Final%2019.02.2015.pdf)

CAFOD, Christian Aid and the ONE Campaign have all used a mixture of messaging in recent reports.<sup>8</sup> These reports talk about the issues of bribery and corruption yet counter with messaging about aid progress, illicit financial flows and CSO/NGO social accounting. This marries what the research tells us: support will not be lost if corruption is mentioned, and using messages on aid works and CSO/NGO social accounting will, if anything, increase support for overseas aid.

### **Aid works messaging**

Corruption is also a reality of life in Kenya, but this does not mean that aid is wasted. For example, aid from the UK has helped 300,000 of Kenya's poorest children go to school, over 50% of them girls. Aid has also improved maternal and reproductive health services helping 15,000 more women give birth with the help of nurses, midwives or doctors. Aid works despite corruption.

### **CSO/NGO social accounting messaging**

Corruption is also a reality of life in Kenya. That's why auditing and monitoring by non-government organisations helps to ensure promises are kept on providing local services to the community, such as repairs to water pipes or delivery of health care. By tracking how money is spent, people can successfully hold public officials to account, ensuring that benefits flow to the intended recipients. Non-government and other organizations support these schemes through training grassroots volunteers.

## **2. Messaging around illicit financial flows is most likely to reduce support**

Although a solid technical argument, the research showed that messaging around illicit financial flows did not resonate well with the UK public. When surveyed, 40.3% of respondents thought we should stop giving aid when corruption and illicit financial flows were mentioned, in comparison to 27.4% of the control group.

Mentioning corruption in the context of bribery and the statistics behind bribes for basic services increases public agreement that aid should not be given to developing countries by 10% compared to the control group. However, this message did not reduce support for aid as much as illicit financial flows messaging.

### **Bribery messaging**

Corruption is also a reality of life in Kenya, which makes it difficult for ordinary people who have to pay to see a doctor or get a document signed. Last year alone, more than 44% of Kenyans reported having to pay a bribe for basic services.

### **Illicit financial flows messaging**

Corruption is also a reality of life in Kenya. But it is the ability of large multinational companies, criminals and corrupt officials to hide money that poses bigger problems. Poor countries lose far more to tax evasion, embezzlement and money laundering than they receive in aid. We can't address problems of corruption without the UK and other countries putting in place better reporting and transparency requirements. The solution to poverty in poor countries is not to cut aid, but to address financial secrecy worldwide.

8. CAFOD (n.d.) Let's be honest: corruption, business and aid. Available from: [http://cafod.org.uk/content/download/2953/21471/version/1/file/Lets%20be%20honest%20Corruption\\_Paper.pdf](http://cafod.org.uk/content/download/2953/21471/version/1/file/Lets%20be%20honest%20Corruption_Paper.pdf)

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ONE (2014) The Trillion dollar scandal. Available from: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/one.org/pdfs/Trillion\\_Dollar\\_Scandal\\_report\\_EN.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/one.org/pdfs/Trillion_Dollar_Scandal_report_EN.pdf)



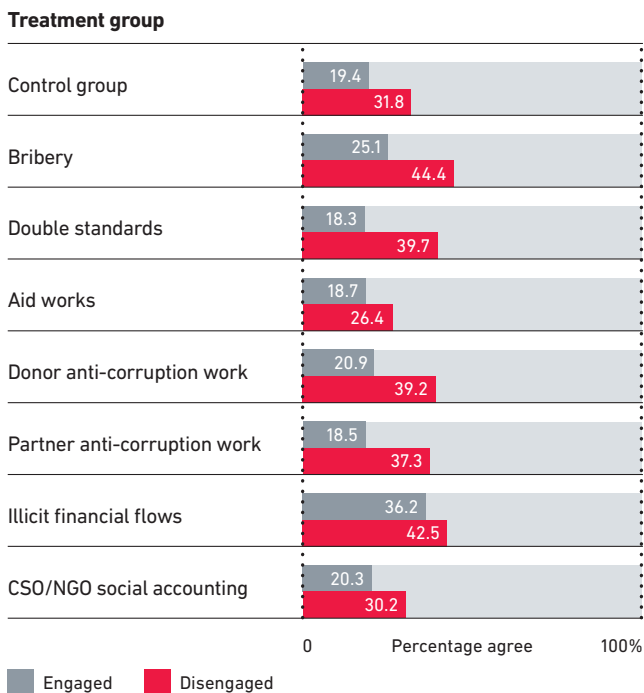
### 3. Breaking audiences down as engaged and disengaged does not make a significant difference in successful messaging on corruption

The only difference between engaged and disengaged audiences is that engaged audiences respond better to messaging on partner anti-corruption work, donor anti-corruption work and the double standards of corruption also taking place in the UK.

Whereas both engaged and disengaged audiences respond well to aid works messaging, disengaged audiences have a stronger response, to the extent that it increases support for giving aid by 5.4% compared to the control group.

If we break audiences down further by gender, political party preferences and qualification level there are slight differences in response, however this is not statistically significant.

#### To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should stop giving aid to poor countries like Kenya? (engaged vs disengaged audience groups)



#### Partner anti-corruption

More than 40% of people in Kenya live below the poverty line and 10,000 children die every year from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water. Corruption is also a reality of life in Kenya, which is why the UK supports the Kenyan government in its anti-corruption initiatives. Kenya's Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission tackles corruption from the national level to the local community. It has charged public officials with corruption as well as conducted surveillance operations and arresting local police officers found guilty of taking bribes from motorists. Aid helps tackle corruption and reduce poverty.

#### Donor anti-corruption

More than 40% of people in Kenya live below the poverty line and 10,000 children die every year from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water. Corruption is also a reality of life in Kenya which is why the UK government has an anti-corruption strategy to safeguard UK taxpayers' money with rigorous risk assessments and monitoring for all aid funded projects in Kenya. The UK is a global leader on transparency. If fraud or corruption is found, the UK government takes action to recover taxpayers' money. The government has also committed to publishing transparent data on departments' spending over £500 and has launched a website to provide information on how and where UK aid is spent and the results achieved.

#### Double standards messaging

More than 40% of people in Kenya live below the poverty line and 10,000 children die every year from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water. Corruption is also a reality of life in Kenya and some people say we should stop sending aid to countries where there is corruption. But is this a double standard? Here in Britain, energy companies have been charged with price fixing, newspapers with phone hacking, and MPs have been jailed for claiming fraudulent expenses, but no one has suggested that the schools or roads in their constituencies stop receiving funding.

#### 4. There is a slight advantage of communicating corruption via personal stories

Additional research undertaken by David Hudson and Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson as part of the Aid Attitude Tracker suggested there was slightly more support for giving aid despite corruption if corruption was spoken about through a personal story of someone experiencing it, compared to a completely statistical or political message.

Christian Aid’s report, *From local to global: stopping corruption from stunting development*,<sup>9</sup> used case studies from Kenya, Nigeria, Peru and Tajikistan to illustrate the effects of corruption on both the populations and those committing the offences.

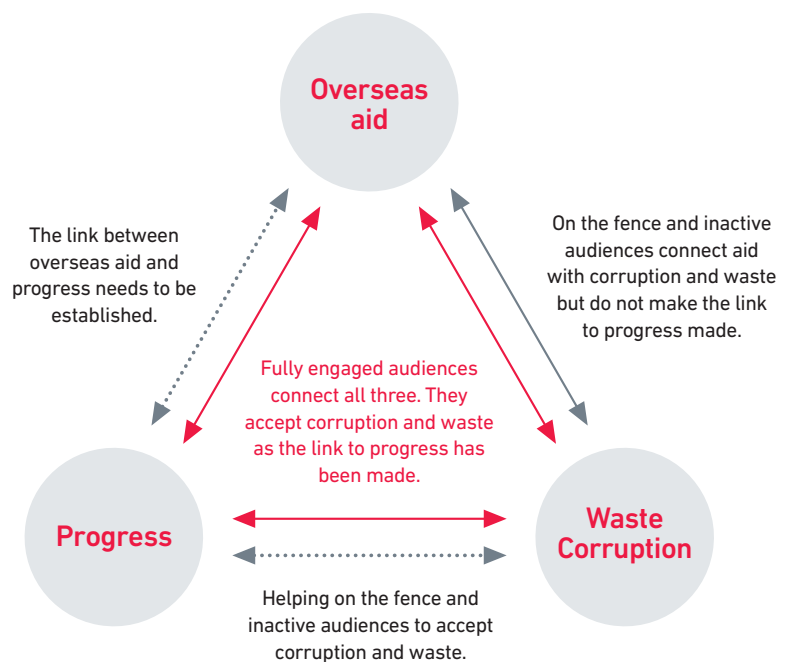
Could development NGOs give more of a platform to people from the global south when talking about corruption in the context of aid and development?

#### 5. The lack of progress seen from aid is a barrier to support

Swing audiences do not always associate aid with progress and therefore talk of corruption and waste can persuade these audiences that rich countries should not give aid to poor countries.

A stronger link between aid and progress needs to be made to ensure swing audiences are convinced of the need for aid despite acts of corruption taking place. It is for this reason that aid works messaging is least likely to cause a reduction in support.

The *Trillion dollar scandal*<sup>10</sup> report by the ONE campaign uses messaging that the research suggests would lose support, including illicit financial flows and bribery, but due to its focus on solutions the authors were able to ensure that the message was positively received. The solutions focus in the *Trillion dollar scandal* and its ability to show progress in developing countries matches research results which suggest that disengaged audiences do not link aid and progress. The ONE campaign were able to match aid and progress for these audiences.



9. Christian Aid (2008) *From local to global: stopping corruption from stunting development*. Available from: <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/from-local-to-global.pdf>

10. ONE (2014) *The Trillion dollar scandal*. Available from: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/one.org/pdfs/Trillion\\_Dollar\\_Scandal\\_report\\_EN.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/one.org/pdfs/Trillion_Dollar_Scandal_report_EN.pdf)

Source for diagram above: AAT (2014) *Qualitative findings: year 1*. Available from: <https://my.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/AAT%20Qualitative%20Findings%20UK%20Report%202014.pdf>

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## Support

Would you like to present these findings to others in your organisation?

We can support you to:

- Access to the Bond Public Support Group where you can find the latest research
- Deliver presentations on the research and the implications for your organisation
- Facilitate a discussion within your organisation about how you might use this evidence
- Test new approaches in your communications

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