

# **Spot the difference: corruption research, academics and NGOs**

*Robert Barrington*

*British Academy*

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## **1. Introduction**

Good afternoon, and thank you to DFID and the British Academy for inviting me to speak today. I am the Executive Director of Transparency International in the UK, an NGO of around 40 people, set up to fight corruption.

I am going to finish by looking at two subjects:

- how researchers and practitioners can engage in more effective dialogue;
- and what an NGO like TI-UK looks for in relation to academic research.

But before I cover those areas, I will start by talking about the anti-corruption research landscape, some of the differences between academic and NGO research, and TI-UK's experiences.

I should mention that I am speaking in my capacity as the head of TI-UK and not as a representative of the entire TI movement; and also that my comments have been shaped by two of my colleagues, Steve Goodrich and Karolina MacLachlan, some of whose ideas I have incorporated wholesale.

## **2. Landscape**

TI was founded in 1993, and it was immediately apparent that although the founders could see the severe negative effects of corruption, little was known about it. There were fundamental questions as:

- Where does corruption happen?
- What types of corruption are there?
- How big is the problem?
- Is corruption different in different areas?
- What is the scale and prevalence?
- How should it be defined?
- Can anything be done about it, and if so what has worked?

A cynic might say that those are exactly the same questions that face us today, and to some extent it is true – but at very least, we know more about what we don't know, and at best we now know a fair amount, and certainly enough to make some sensible policy choices.

The little research available before the advent of TI was the product of some well-known academics, some of whom might not have considered themselves as experts on corruption, and most if not all of whom did not have a research position or remit dedicated to corruption. TI set about generating its own research, and whether through a cause or effect of the existence of TI, or it is entirely unrelated, corruption research mushroomed.

Now there is much more research about corruption – and also a great deal about TI as an NGO.

One way we can see this is by the number of subscribers to the ACRN, the Anti-Corruption Research Network. It has grown from a few dozen when it was founded in 2010, to over 1300 members and 5,000 newsletter subscribers worldwide today.

So although there are a lot of things we still don't know, the world is better equipped to research corruption than ever before.

### **3. Spot the difference**

I want to touch on some of the differences between academic and NGO research. In many ways, this speech is itself an example. It is a series of opinions based on experience, and with an advocacy intent: I would like the world to have more research that supports TI's basic tenets and mission, and my remarks will be based on that premise. There may well be a thriving academic discourse on the difference between academic and NGO research. I am blithely ignoring it; but at the same time, I hope it will not make my points worthless.

Let me enter the Lion's den by talking about the CPI. In any other company, I would explain what that acronym means, but not here.

It clearly drives academics mad. There is a thriving literature about its methodological weaknesses, what it does and does not reveal about global corruption and what a prejudiced and insubstantial NGO TI obviously must be to produce such dangerous nonsense. You can find links to this on our website, in the spirit of free and open debate! However, I did draw the line at giving airtime to the person who was convinced that TI had taken a bribe from the British government to put the UK in the top ten.

So it drives academics mad - but TI would be mad not to undertake and promote it. There is no single more convincing alternative; it generates a global debate every year when it is published; and it encourages many countries to do better. That's a great contribution to TI's mission.

A second example of differences comes to mind from a debate on Matthew Stephenson's Global Anti-Corruption Blog. He is unimpressed by the numbers that are often cited around global corruption – for example, that US\$1 trillion is paid in bribes each year. He asks:

“I’m...generally curious about the role (and relative importance) of seemingly precise “big numbers” in anticorruption advocacy work. Do we really need them? Why? And is what we gain worth the costs?”

Most of the comments on this blog come from NGO advocates who point out that, with whatever caveats and however inaccurate, a simple number is necessary for advocacy purposes. And that neatly encapsulates an essential difference: as academic researchers and NGO researchers, we are doing different jobs.

As an NGO, TI is ultimately interested in advocacy, policy making and change. The research we generate and use must be fit for this purpose.

Academics differ in several respects. They will place their research within, or will construct, a theoretical framework. They use language that is more familiar to the academic community than others. And their intrinsic purpose is to understand the world and not to change it.

A further illustration of this is that there is a cadre of corruption academics, some in the tax justice arena, and some with a particular loathing of certain areas such as the British establishment or the City, who do seem to operate with a very specific agenda. They remind me of the Marxist historians I used to encounter in the long-distant days when I did a PhD, in Oxford and Italy. They were often persuasive advocates for a particular cause, but I too often found their research to be insubstantial, with pre-formed opinion driving the conclusions. This seems to me to illustrate the difficulty when academic researchers really want to be advocates.

But in highlighting these differences, I am not trying to propose that these worlds should be separated. Much academic research can be of great use to practitioners if they know how to use and interpret it; and typical practitioner questions such as 'so what' and 'what can I do about it'? - can help focus academic research.

It is also the case that the differences can be exaggerated and in my view the links between academia and NGOs are much better in the corruption field than elsewhere.

To illustrate this, recently TI convened a workshop on corruption and conservation, another high-profile subject in which there are exceptionally good academics and NGOs. It was soon clear both that the academics and practitioners seldom interact, and that within each community there are separate turfs each occupied by experts who seem to speak little to each other despite to the outside observer having much in common – strategies for climate change mitigation, forestry, illegal wildlife trading and the conservation of biodiversity all seem to operate separately.

So despite the differences in approach, in my view we have a relatively favourable situation in the sphere of corruption research.

#### **4. How TI uses research**

I can think of a couple of ways in which NGOs typically use research.

The first is formulation - using research to help form a view.

The second, and I think most common, is legitimisation - using research to support a view already formed. The problem with this second type is that it can lead to using research selectively; but I imagine even more heinous to this company, is that it can lead to commissioning research whose result is pre-determined.

I like to think that TI is primarily interested in research for formulation, with legitimisation important and not to be abused.

Here's an example. In 2013, we set up a Corrupt Enrichment Taskforce, to examine whether there should be an UNCAC-compliant law on illicit enrichment in the UK. I was responsible for setting it up, recruiting its members and creating its terms of reference, and was fairly confident the answer would be 'yes, we need an illicit enrichment law'. However, this was by no means pre-ordained, and the Taskforce did not in fact reach that conclusion. Instead, it recommended the introduction of Unexplained Wealth Orders.

That was about fifteen months ago, and it looks likely that the government may indeed introduce such an instrument. I have nothing apart from anecdotal evidence, but I am fairly certain that the eminence of our taskforce and the quality of our supporting publication have been instrumental in getting this on the government's agenda. My point here is that as advocates, independent and objective research is a great way of persuading and influencing in a democracy like the UK. Of course, many of my colleagues in TI's one hundred chapters operate under different political systems, and research and advocacy may necessarily play a different role in each case.

By contrast, we do run up against some fairly shoddy research from others, most recently by those who are seeking to undermine the Bribery Act. TI takes as a starting point that corporate bribery is unethical, as it damages the country in which bribes are paid, distorting the economy and undermining fair competition. Most social analysis supports this. Thankfully, most economic analyses also seem to support this. Those who oppose the Bribery Act take as their starting point that preventing companies from paying bribes gives an unfair advantage to competitors (the French are often cited) who do pay bribes.

The opponents of the Bribery Act feel the best way to undermine it is to argue that it puts British companies at a competitive disadvantage and imposes a red-tape burden – two arguments that seem likely to win the hearts and minds of a Conservative government. However, the research to back this up has been very flimsy – and I am thinking of two studies in particular, by the UK's leading industry confederation CBI and a large accountancy firm. I would even go so far as to say that if anyone working for me had produced such research, I hope they would no longer be at TI.

More broadly, this illustrates that the world of research includes others as well as academic and NGOs – and that research from some sources can be of poor quality and intentionally biased.

An interesting and disturbing recent development has been the decision by the UK government to include a clause in all of its contracts – which presumably will apply to those in this room – which prevents the use of those funds to make policy or other recommendations to or about the UK government. You might think this is reasonable: why should the government's own money be used to fund campaigns against it? In practical terms, it is likely to gag independent research. By the nature of standard grant accounting, and I believe following the Charity Commission's own guidance, I have a contribution to my salary traceable to any grant from DFID.

Under these new contracts, that means I should not speak about the results of the CPI when they are unfavourable to the UK – not a great example to set to repressive regimes around the world, under whose rule the CPI is at times one of the few hooks civil society can use each year to progress the fight against corruption. So we have an undesirable situation in which DFID, a donor one would hope to be enlightened, is being signed up by the Cabinet Office to exercise control over the research. We recently turned away a private sector donor trying to do just that. I sincerely hope the government will change its mind.

To re-cap, my touchstones for research at TI-UK are that we should have a proper research process – for example in oversight and terms of reference – that we do not seek to pre-determine the result, that we undertake research to a high standard, and that we should be clearly independent.

## **5. A more effective dialogue**

Given the obvious benefits of practitioners and academics working more closely together, how can we best make that happen?

One of my colleagues gives this advice:

“An indispensable first step for practitioners: do not use 'academic' as synonym for 'irrelevant' or 'obscure'. This is an absolute requirement for smooth cooperation, as well as a measure preventing time-wasting, as academics will not need to explain why this is SO wrong.”

But it's true that academics do have an image problem in many NGOs, and I'm sure the reverse is true. Incidentally, I can add that when I worked in the City in one of Europe's largest investment houses, the term 'academic' was a term of abuse.

One benefit to build on is that both the academic and NGO, and indeed policymaking and law enforcement, communities, are still small in this field. With a bit of effort, it is possible to know or know of everyone. I am a great believer in developing personal contacts (I'm not sure when networking becomes cronyism, but let's leave that aside!), and TI has made a deliberate effort in the UK to form links with departments where relevant work seems to be happening.

Much of what might be considered a barrier is attitude. Practitioners sometimes expect solutions which while not being easy, at least have some certainty attached to them. Perhaps practitioners could make greater use of research if they accept the

'maybes', and understand that academics tend to be much more careful when making pronouncements and arriving at conclusions.

Conversely, the dense language of academia, and particularly the self-referential world of academic research where the work of other theorists, not the issue at hand, becomes a primary point of reference, can easily put off practitioners.

It is also the case that academics are willing to challenge orthodox thinking, and I believe that NGOs with public support and helpful donors are sometimes carried along by their sense of outrage to the detriment of challenging their assumptions. It is, for example, challenging for TI when academics (and I don't just mean those being deliberately provocative, one of the less attractive academic traits) claim that corruption is actually economically beneficial. Of course, we know that's counter-intuitive, certainly to the experiences of ordinary people; but it helps us think through why there is such a dissonance, and in what circumstances, and how the research reached such a conclusion. The important thing for NGOs is to remain open-minded.

My advice on a better dialogue is therefore simple. Be willing to make it happen. Form personal and institutional connections. Congregate in the same places, whether online or in person. And set aside prejudices.

## **6. What we would ideally like out of research**

I'll conclude by suggesting three things that NGOs would ideally like from research. In doing so, I'd like to mention that DFID, gagging clauses aside, have done a magnificent thing in running this competition with the British Academy. For a relatively small amount of money, we could make some really important progress.

1. Something we can't do ourselves. NGOs have a number of constraints that restrict what we can do, such as capacity, technical capability and perhaps most of all time. Academics may have some or all of these. For example, TI would welcome some network mapping research into influence within the political system, but this would require a lot of time and computing skills that we just don't have. And most of our research from conception to publication takes a maximum of nine months, and sometimes just a few days.

2. Something that can be cited with confidence. NGO advocacy is more effective when supported by tangible evidence and not just hearsay or rumour. There are plenty of news articles that use rumour, and we need findings that have depth and integrity. This does not mean it has to be simplistic or unqualified; but robust research from credible sources helps us enormously.

3. Something that really pushes a debate forward or treads new ground. Academic research can be surprisingly weak here, recycling similar things with the addition of a small amount of new information; but at its best it can be really useful and important.

Interestingly, I think we have learnt more about illicit flows from the NCA and briefings from economists in private sector institutions like Deutsche Bank than we have from academia.

On the other hand, a recent piece of academic research that really worked for TI was a study on the relationship between political donations and appointments to the Lords.<sup>1</sup> It helped move the debate on from speculation about the relationship between the two variables to something more scientific (albeit with the usual caveats and qualifiers). They described their findings marvellously: “the odds of it [the relationship between donations and peerages] being pure coincidence are roughly the same as those of entering Britain’s National Lottery five consecutive times, and winning the jackpot on each occasion. Whilst coincidence is theoretically possible, this explanation does stretch the limits of credulity.”

What do I conclude? We should be two communities that work closely together. There is little excuse not to. And as an advocate, this is my message: our subject is too important for academics to be obscure or self-referential, or for NGOs to be ill-informed, misguided or unchallenged. Our choice is not whether to work hand-in-hand, but how we should do so. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.economics.ox.ac.uk/Department-of-Economics-Discussion-Paper-Series/is-there-a-market-for-peerages-can-donations-buy-you-a-british-peerage-a-study-in-the-link-between-party-political-funding-and-peerage-nominations-2005>