1. Introduction

In 2011, the Global Integrity released an index that scores the anti-corruption measures of countries. A country stands out remarkably in Asia. It scores an admirable 86.9 on its legal framework (for reference, Germany stands slightly lower at 81.0). It boasts a nearly perfect score on anti-corruption law, which criminalize bribery, extortion, and misuse of public assets. Better yet, the country has established a host of supporting, including a national ombudsman that is protected by law against political interference (The Central Vigilance Commission Act of 2003 cvc.nic.in/cvcact.pdf)—something that is left for citizens to desire in even the United States. On top of that is an independent agency with the legal mandate to address corruption. The vigilance commissioner tenure is ensured by law; he can only be removed by the head of a democratically elected government, based on an inquiry by the Supreme Court.

The Asian country that is so exemplary in its anti-corruption effort is India, of course. A comparably high performer in having a developed legal framework is Indonesia, with a near perfect overall score of 94.6, leaving both the Germany and the United States, two only OECD countries included, lagging behind. And this pattern extends well beyond Asia to all corners of the developing world, including Uganda (97.8) and Kenya (83.2). These developing countries all possess, on paper at least, world-class legal and bureaucratic systems. The intensive effort by the international development community to spread knowledge and tout models, to either push or cajole countries into adopting best practices, has certainly paid off in this regard.

But we—as committed organizations and passionate professionals—care not about laws on paper but lives on Earth. Does the experience of corruption improve? Does the implementation of these flawless laws also flawless? Unfortunately, the rate of improvement of governance on the ground has been glacially low. Even if we use an optimistic estimate of country’s rate of progress (by assuming that they have the lowest possible starting point, equals to that of Somalia today), calculations have shown that it will take these countries hundreds, even over a thousand of years, in order to catch up with the standard of today Singapore. Our intensive effort to promote best practice and good institutional form has led to improvement, but only in the sense that a new anti-corruption law passed with little real effect is an improvement, and only in the sense that development achieved over hundreds of years is a success.

Of course, that is not to say that all technical assistance or knowledge solution are not valuable. Certainly, if there is a new and affordable drug it should not be held back from citizens of developing world. Or if there is engineering expertise that improves the quality and efficiency of infrastructure, it should not remain out of the country’s reach. Yet, in many areas of development we have to work with people instead, people with agency, goal, and improvisation whose behaviors we can anticipate much less than we do that of concrete and viruses.

Furthermore, going beyond technical assistance is to go deep in to politics.