

# How should USAID foster anti-corruption in contexts where “political will” is weak?



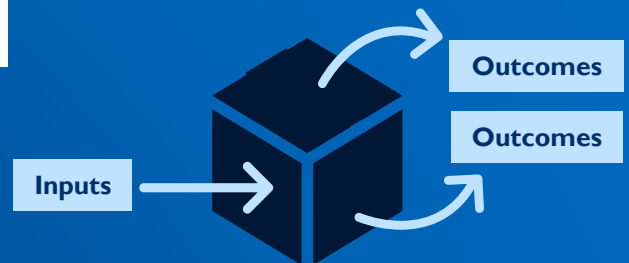
The Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance’s (DRG) 2021-2023 learning agenda seeks to answer five learning questions, including this question on anti-corruption. More on the DRG Learning Agenda can be found [here](#). In this case, researchers from Duke Center for International Development conducted an extensive literature review and examined four cases of promising anti-corruption approaches in greater depth.

## The Problem

**A lack of political will:** A common refrain is that efforts to combat corruption are frustrated by the low political will of politicians and bureaucrats. Political will is often defined as the “commitment of national or local leaders to undertake actions that reduce corruption in their jurisdictions and to sustain the costs of those actions over time.” Absent such political will, practitioners find that these politicians block anti-corruption initiatives outright, slow-roll their implementation, or undermine their influence by depriving them of resources or creating countervailing rules or institutions.

## An Inadequate Diagnosis

Unfortunately, this diagnosis of the problem is problematic. First, the concept of political will is inherently difficult to measure, resulting in a “**black-box**” effect. If an intervention does not work, we do not know if it was because of a lack of political will or something else. Second, common use of the term obscures the specific reason for low political will and can also conflate the motivation with the capacity to implement. Such opacity prevents targeted interventions for change. Third, usage of the term also places disproportionate agency on individual anti-corruption champions, whereas sustaining reforms requires more broad-based support and commitment.



## The Five Logics for Political Economy Analysis

In practice, there are **five underlying logics** informing a diagnosis of low political will, each of which should be explored as part of a political economy analysis and “thinking and working politically” approach.



The official **benefits personally** from the corruption and is unwilling to forgo the income or other pecuniary benefits that it provides.



An official may owe their **political power** to their ability to distribute corrupt rents to other elite politicians.



An official may be **captured by economic actors**, such as state-owned enterprises, connected companies, or powerful oligarchs, who are resistant to reforms and put pressure on the politician to thwart them.



An official may be **sincerely interested** in anti-corruption but may face roadblocks from powerful subordinates who benefit from the status quo.



**Lack of capacity** can be confused with will, such that an official may be incentivized to tackle corruption but may lack sufficient resources and expertise.

## Adopt a Sectoral Strategy

By focusing on specific sectors, programs can **identify and exploit specific sectoral-level opportunities** as an overall strategy in challenging contexts. Key to a sectoral approach is ensuring a focus on sectoral-level policy outcomes (e.g., improved education, health, or infrastructure outcomes) and addressing corruption to achieve these outcomes. For instance, if educational reform is highly salient and critical, corruption spoilers might be easier to sideline to accomplish larger goals, such as higher graduation rates, test scores, or labor productivity. This approach is sometimes alternatively labeled as a policy-based, indirect, or side-door approach.

## Consider a Promising Approach

The study determined that **four families of interventions** have the greatest chance of success in challenging contexts due to their coherent theories of change, empirical support, reasonable costs, and political feasibility. These include:

1. **Transparency initiatives** to inform citizens of the impacts of government programs and policies, which allow individuals to insulate themselves from bribe requests and monitor the budgets and fiscal dispersals of local and national leaders.
2. **Social audits**, where non-state, civil society actors are provided with monitoring tools to hold corrupt officials accountable through policy and financial reviews and related watchdog functions;
3. **E-governance reforms**, which reduce corruption by removing lower-level bureaucratic discretion over regulatory procedures and eliminating opportunities for malfeasance by reducing the number of administrative nodes citizens and firms must navigate to access basic services and complete standard procedures.
4. **Procurement reforms**, which ensure open access to government tenders, lowering opportunities for lucrative capture of contracts by connected and bribe-paying bidders.

## Prepare for a Window of Opportunity

In four original cases examined in this study (Vietnam, Mozambique, Ukraine, and Peru), change was permitted within the context of a window of opportunity when the status quo of “politics as usual” was **suddenly and dramatically challenged**. Such windows can be exploited by reform coalitions with access to information and resources.