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Fighting corruption in infrastructure delivery in South Africa

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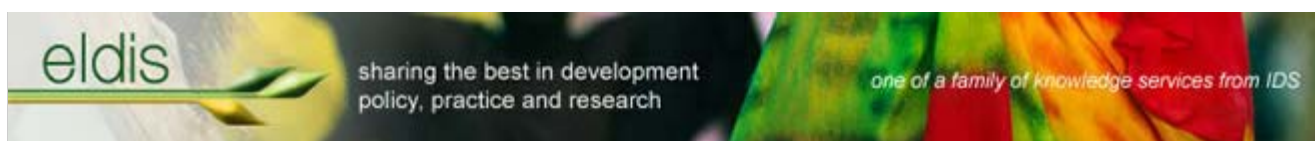
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Fighting corruption in infrastructure delivery in South Africa

The post-apartheid South African state has been committed to development focused on delivering infrastructure and basic services to poor, mostly black communities. Pro-poor policies have been accompanied with measures to ensure resources actually reach their targets, but corruption is undermining public confidence in democratic government.

South Africa is not corrupt in the sense that its policies neglect poor people. Since 1994, public spending on health, education, welfare, housing and other social services has increased dramatically. The question is what percentage of this actually reaches poor people and what is lost to corruption. A report from the Water, Engineering and Development Centre, at Loughborough University, in the UK, investigates the causes and effects of corruption as it affects the delivery of infrastructure and services to poor people within South Africa, as well as the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures.

Corruption may be defined as the abuse of public power for private or sectional gain. According to organisations such as Transparency International, corruption in South Africa is slightly worse than average amongst countries surveyed, if not as bad as in most African states. Other measures such as the Afrobarometer suggest that South Africans were likely to see less government corruption in 2005 than they did during the 1990s.

Certainly there is no lack of anti-corruption institutions. President Thabo Mbeki has come out strongly against corruption, backing government institutions such as the Public Service Commission and the Auditor General's office. South Africa has a well developed civil society network consisting of organisations with different areas of expertise and approaches to corruption. Civil society has also partnered with government to combat corruption, though not always successfully, as in the Eastern Cape.

Corruption is particularly persistent in local government, which has consistently failed to make finances public. The researcher also observes that:

- Corruption can involve specific abuse of tendering and procurement procedures, or weak controls and questionable decision-making that disadvantage poor people.
- Infrastructure projects appear to have been developed for political or symbolic reasons without any reasonable assurance of practical value to beneficiaries.
- Increased service costs are not necessarily related to investment for better services, and may owe more to inflated managerial salaries.
- Targeting has not worked: the National Treasury found that in 2003/2004, of 27 million people who received free basic services, only 12 million were actually poor.

This is inexcusable given the constitutional mandate municipalities have to deliver free basic services to poor households, for which they have received preferential budgetary increases. Key recommendations include:

- A 'corruption barometer' could track the number of projects disrupted by financial irregularities and the severity of corruption involved.
- Official anti-corruption bodies should improve consultation and reporting mechanisms with victimised communities, preferably with civil society.
- Civil society-government partnerships should consider the political context and be realistic and coherent in defining anti-corruption strategies that can deal with partnership disputes.
- Civil society needs to build networks involving the state and the media, and should support unfairly victimised government officials without getting drawn into politics.

Source(s):

'Corruption in Infrastructure Delivery: South Africa – A Case Study', Partnering to Combat Corruption Series, WEDC: Loughborough, by Glenn Hollands, 2007 (PDF) [Full document](#).

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Further Information:

Mohammad Sohail
Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC)
John Pickford Building
Loughborough University
Loughborough LE11 3TU
UK

Tel: +44 (0)1509 222890

Fax: +44 (0)1509 211079

Contact the contributor: m.sohail@lboro.ac.uk

[Water, Engineering and Development Centre \(WEDC\), Loughborough University, UK](#)

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