

## The Context of Corruption: Translocal Dimensions Insights from Uganda Sebastian Haug

*“On the African continent, [...] corruption is not just endemic but an integral part of the social fabric of life”*

*(Chabal/Daloz 1999: 99)*



*Corruption is widely believed to be one of the main plights of contemporary African societies. The concept of social logics (understood as patterns that structure and dominate social behaviour) is one particular approach to conceptualizing and understanding the context of corruption on the African continent. The Ugandan context provides evidence for the relevance of some of the social logics previously identified in the literature. However, the findings also point to additional logics that are linked to external actors and structures. The case of Uganda suggests that anti-corruption strategies need to not only account for the specificity of social context in different locales but also for the ‘translocal’*

*dimensions of social interaction.*

The Aristotelian distinction between public and private spheres<sup>8</sup> is the foundation for the concept of politics – and thus the basis for the conceptualization of political corruption: what is corrupted is the ‘public interest’<sup>9</sup> for the sake of some sort of private reward. In the context of a global order that relies on the Western distinction between public and private domains, politics (and political corruption as one aspect of it) claims some sort of de facto universality. In societies on the African continent this distinction, which is often alien to local traditions, challenges the understanding of the particular context in which corrupt practices are an integral part of social life. In this paper I briefly lay out social logics – understood as patterns that structure and dominate social behaviour – as one particular approach to conceptualizing the context of corruption. Based on my empirical research I show that the Ugandan context

provides evidence for the relevance of some of the social logics previously identified in the literature. However, the findings also point to additional social logics that are linked to external actors and structures and increasingly dominate social life in Uganda.

### **Investigating the social context of corruption**

The vast majority of corruption researchers<sup>10</sup> follow Heidenheimer (1993: 159) who understands political corruption as “deeply rooted in more general social relationships and obligations”. With regards to the context of corruption on the African continent, scholars have pointed to the coexistence of modern, rational-legal state structures and traditional, patrimonial networks (Médard 2002, Blundo 2006)<sup>11</sup>. The concept of neo-patrimonialism tries to account for the tension between these

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle distinguishes between personal and political rule, see Philp (1997: 450).

<sup>9</sup> For an often cited public-interest definition see Friedrich (cited in Heidenheimer et al. 1993: 10).

<sup>10</sup> See f. ex. scholars as different as Scott (1969), Leys (1965), Nye (1993), Bayart (1990).

<sup>11</sup> Mamdani (2004: 9), by contrast, points to the pitfalls of the concept of neo-patrimonialism as an over-simplified “history by analogy”.

conflicting social patterns and, with regards to African societies, holds that “corruption is in reality a complex of behavioural patterns which are key ingredients of the continent’s modernity” (Chabal/Daloz 1999: 101).

Situated within an anthropologically inspired tradition<sup>12</sup>, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (OdS)’s contributions on corruption<sup>13</sup> argue for the existence of social logics<sup>14</sup> that are generally found within African societies<sup>15</sup>. As “normative configurations which influence actors’ strategies” (OdS 1999: 44), these social logics are defined as part of the framework that allows for the “routinisation and banalisation” (26) of corruption in African societies.

### **Social logics and the Ugandan context of corruption**

The particular experience of Uganda since independence from colonial rule has shown political corruption to be a seemingly indispensable part of Ugandan politics<sup>16</sup>. Ever since Western development policies started to endorse the concept of ‘good governance’, political corruption has been increasingly linked to the growing apparatus of anti-corruption that has itself become a dominant feature of politics in Uganda.

<sup>12</sup> For anthropological research on corruption see an overview in Hasty (2005), in more detail Haller/Shore (2005: 1-26); for the standard work within the US political science tradition of corruption research see Heidenheimer et al. 1993); for a general overview on corruption research see Blundo (2006).

<sup>13</sup> See Olivier de Sardan (1999, 2006); see also Blundo (2006).

<sup>14</sup> Social logics as central part of social context are also found in academic contributions not directly related to corruption research (see Schlichte/Veith 2010: 261-262).

<sup>15</sup> Olivier de Sardan builds on academic debates about the characteristic forms of corruption in developing countries; the relevant context is defined according to common or similar cultural foundations and historical experience. For early contributions see Leys (1965) or Scott (1969).

<sup>16</sup> See Tangri/Mwenda (2005, 2006, 2008); Ouma (1991).

Based on the assumption that “understanding is the essential prerequisite for [...] reform” (Blundo/Olivier de Sardan 2006: 14) I wanted to look at a case study in order to investigate the relevance of “African social logics” in a particular national context. In the framework of my research which started in July 2010 I have interviewed over twenty Ugandan anti-corruption professionals (people experienced in working in major state or non-state branches of the Ugandan anti-corruption scene) in order to find out whether “African social logics” are relevant in the Ugandan context – and whether there are relevant logics that are missing in OdS’s account.

I found that, to differing extents, OdS’s social logics of negotiation, solidarity networks and predatory authority (for an overview see OdS 1999) are indeed reflected in the Ugandan context of corruption. These social logics focus on locally grown patterns: competing legal and political standards have widened the margin of the negotiation of rules which, in turn, has widened the space for corrupt practices; solidarity with one’s own family is judged as far more important than one’s responsibility towards the wider community; and holding a public office has come to be regarded as a source of private resource extraction (“the right to extort”) rather than a service to society.

However, at least one crucial social phenomenon dominating the Ugandan (anti-)corruption complex is missing in the conventional account on social logics: the impact of actors and structures that have emerged in the course of development cooperation between Uganda and (mostly) Western institutions. Based on the conducted interviews I have extrapolated two inter-related additional social logics that grasp the direct and indirect influence of external development actors: the “logic of per diem” and the “logic of donor superiority”. In what follows I give a concise overview of what is

behind these two additional social logics which, while mainly reflecting Ugandan realities, may give an idea of what is happening in a range of different corruption contexts all over Africa.

### **The logic of per diem**

The first logic describes the ‘per diem’ mentality and its impact on the working context of public servants and NGO workers as well as on the implementation of anti-corruption programmes. The perverted use (Hakizimana 2007) of per diems – initially introduced as daily allowances paid for “approved employee expenditure” (Vian 2009: 1) – is a general phenomenon in Uganda. The interview accounts cite per diems as the epitome of a new culture that dominates day-to-day working relationships: people only attend workshops and go to conferences or ‘in the field’ once they are paid extra. The calculation of adequate per diems is different in each organisation and the object of competition between or within the public sector and civil society organizations. As one respondent put it: conference organizers “compete on who pays better” and cause the “arms race” (Vian 2009: 4) of per diems.

In agreement with the few existing academic contributions on the topic (Vian 2009, Ridde 2009, Chêne 2009), the interview accounts are mainly pointing to the influx of development aid as decisive force in creating the per diem mentality. Within the Ugandan anti-corruption scene, some actors (particularly donors) pay more than others and create a conspicuous atmosphere among anti-corruption professionals.

In addition to impacting anti-corruption work within and beyond state structures, the ‘logic of per diem’ has a direct effect on corrupt practices themselves. Paying yourself extra money for ‘external

consultancies’<sup>17</sup> becomes acceptable in an environment where people are used to getting (compared to their general income) enormous amounts of money for particular activities like workshops or conferences<sup>18</sup>. The ‘logic of per diem’ opens up a new dimension of how ‘misuse of public office’ can be accommodated with the help of social logics that emerge as the mix of external and internal processes.

### **The logic of donor superiority**

The second logic focuses on the role of external actors that exceeds a simple broker position and influences the general structure of Ugandan politics and anti-corruption, including the way corrupt practices are performed. The term ‘donor superiority’ tries to grasp a phenomenon that has its starting point at what OdS (1999: 37) calls the position of “intermediaries”: according to the interview accounts, donor institutions and individuals working for them are at the very core of a normative configuration that establishes a clear hierarchy with far-reaching implications for both Ugandan politics and the Ugandan anti-corruption world itself.

In Uganda as elsewhere in Africa “a considerable portion of development aid now takes the form of support for anti-corruption programmes” (Blundo 2006: 57)<sup>19</sup>. The World Bank, which after years of neglect is now most eager to show its fervent commitment to the global fight against corruption (Cramer 2008: 3), plays a prominent role within the interview accounts. One of the civil society activists remembers a conversation on anti-

---

<sup>17</sup> As has happened in the Ugandan Ministry of Finance (interviews).

<sup>18</sup> On the link between patronage and consultancies in development work see Cooksey (2002:47).

<sup>19</sup> On the role of donors in anti-corruption programmes see Michael (2004).

corruption funds with a World Bank official in Kampala: “And then this [World Bank] guy told me: ‘The money will be eaten anyway – so eat it! Otherwise it’s someone else who’ll get it’”. Cooksey (2002: 49) once argued that the World Bank is torn between the “approval culture” and the “disbursement culture”: operations under way are not sufficiently evaluated, and the emerging gap in anti-corruption measures provides additional opportunities for the expansion of the corruption complex.

A range of Ugandan interview partners pointed to the vested interests of foreign development officials regarding the actual use of anti-corruption funds. Whereas Western governments and international organizations present committed rhetoric and action for transparency and accountability and link their financial support to a range of conditionalities<sup>20</sup>, their officials penetrate the corruption complex abroad, in the “base camp” arena (Schlichte/Veit 2010: 262) of global development. Until recently, not even symbolic measures were taken on the donor side to react to this dimension of development cooperation in Uganda<sup>21</sup>. Concrete examples point to the role of Western officials in facilitating corrupt exchanges, e.g. by infringing Ugandan procurement law to secure Ugandan tenders for their industries (as in the case of the German ambassador to Uganda collaborating with a German company and the Ugandan government to secure the tender for new Ugandan IDs). The interviews also speak of overt nepotism in Western development agencies, where the recently graduated offspring of Western officials are put in senior positions supervising experienced Ugandans.

<sup>20</sup> On conditionalities in development aid see Moyo (2009: 38).

<sup>21</sup> On the recent donor aid cut see Habati (2010).

The World Bank, Western development agencies or Western governments provide most of the funding for Ugandan anti-corruption programmes and Ugandan anti-corruption NGOs; and these same institutions are the ones assessing the effectiveness of funded projects or programmes (which, in turn, provides the basis for further funding and hence for the existence of the major part of the Ugandan anti-corruption movement).

### **Translocal dimensions in the Ugandan context of corruption**

Both additional logics point to the crucial role of certain development cooperation actors – particularly donors and donor-induced structures – for Ugandan politics and underline the need to include the “translocal” (Gupta 1995: 392)<sup>22</sup> aspect in the analysis of corruption. “[E]nclaves of intransparency” (Haller/Shore 2005: 14) – the recruitment standards at Western development agencies, the disbursement methods of World Bank officials or the role European ambassadors endorse behind closed doors – are part of emerging logics of social interaction that shape Ugandan realities.

As a “show case” of the World Bank (Dijkstra/Van Donge 1999: 841), Uganda figures prominently as one of several African countries where “massive [external] financial support [...] has provided [...] governments with the means of redynamizing the channels of patronage” (Blundo 2006: 57). Particularly Tangri and Mwenda (2005, 2006) show the perverted impact of development aid on politics in Uganda and

<sup>22</sup> ‘Translocal’ refers to the challenge of taking the different dimensions of corrupt practices in a certain locale into account, particularly those with direct and indirect links to the ‘external’ sphere, and points to important methodological questions (Gupta 1995: 392; Haller/Shore 2005: 15).

agree with one of the interview respondents who argued that donors “are part and parcel of political corruption in Uganda”.

The ‘logic of donor superiority’ exposes a particular range of actors – those involved in bi- and multilateral development cooperation, mostly within Western entities based in Uganda – who are in a particularly powerful position of shaping the context of both political corruption and the institutionalized fight against it. And the ‘logic of per diem’ provides an example for how external influences may change local structures of interaction. As translocal dependencies and hierarchies have a long history in Uganda, an informed analysis of historical processes is an indispensable component for coming to terms with today’s realities.

The ‘logic of per diem’ and the ‘logic of donor superiority’ are interrelated and urge us to look at a historical development including the legacy of (late) colonialism (Mamdani 2004). Following Bayart (1990:37), a historical approach can help to trace how the general social set-up (including social logics) has come about, as most of the “tools for the intensive practice of corruption” were effectively shaped under colonial rule. Here, the concentration on colonial experience is not used for excusing current grievances<sup>23</sup> but only a necessary step towards a critical analysis of patterns of development aid and donor dependency that often paralyse African societies<sup>24</sup>. The colonial encounter and the development it engendered are maybe not ‘the’ root but one root among several of the contemporary

<sup>23</sup> Even though their contributions are of value in other respects, Seitz (2009) and Moyo (2009) unfortunately dismiss the colonial legacy as integral part of the analysis in order to (supposedly) strengthen their argument.

<sup>24</sup> On the paralysing role of development aid see Moyo (2009); for a historical analysis and the role of development organizations in francophone West Africa see Ods (2004).

context of politics in Uganda.

### **A challenge to the global fight against corruption: the specificity of social context**

The general impetus of corruption research is to contribute to tackling a phenomenon that perverts the underlying foundations of society. The strategies of globally active anti-corruption institutions are attractive because they provide ‘universal’ truths and thus correspond to the de facto universal definition of corruption. By contrast, Hasty (2005: 294) proposes “localised strategies” as a more effective way for fighting corruption. Following Hasty’s proposition and the findings outlined above, a specifically Ugandan approach to anti-corruption has to take into account that translocal actors and structures influence the social context of corrupt exchanges (including the Ugandan anti-corruption scene itself). The development of concrete anti-corruption strategies can be a complex and often frustrating enterprise, notably once clear-cut global strategies are left behind in order to engage with particular social contexts.

Burr (2003: 168) argues that research can legitimize itself by throwing “new light on previous findings”. The research at hand and its extrapolation of social patterns which have been overlooked in the literature on social logics joins contributions that emphasize the relevance of translocal forces in the context of corruption. Understanding corruption and its context in a specific locale requires an empirical analysis of both current patterns and their historical development – on the African continent and elsewhere.

### **References**

Bayart, Jean-François 1990: *La Corruption en Afrique, Histoires de Développement*, 9, 36-40.

Blundo, Giorgio 2006: *Corruption in Africa and the*

- Social Sciences. A Review of the Literature, in: Blundo, Girogio and Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre (eds.): *Everyday Corruption and the State. Citizens and Public Officials in Africa*, London: Zed Books, 15-68.
- Blundo, Giorgio and Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre 2006: *Why Should We Study Everyday Corruption and How Should We Go About It?*, in: *Everyday Corruption and the State. Citizens and Public Officials in Africa*, London: Zed Books, 3-14.
- Burr, Vivian 2003: *Social Constructivism*, London: Routledge.
- Chêne, Marie 2009: *Low Salaries, the Culture of Per Diems and Corruption*, Bergen: Anti-Corruption Research Centre, <<http://www.u4.no/helpdesk/helpdesk/query.cfm?id=220>> (12.08.2012).
- Dijkstra, Geske and Van Donge, Jan Kees 2001: *What Does the 'Show Case' Show? Evidence of and Lessons from Adjustment in Uganda*, *World Development*, 29:5, 841-863.
- Gupta, Akhil 1995: *Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics and the Imagined State*, *American Ethnologist*, 22:2, 375-402.
- Haller, Dieter and Shore, Cris 2005: *Introduction - Sharp Practice: Anthropology and the Study of Corruption*, in: Haller, Dieter and Shore, Cris (eds.): *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*, London: Pluto Press, 1-26.
- Hasty, Jennifer 2005: *The Pleasures of Corruption: Desire and Discipline in Ghanaian Political Culture*, *Cultural Anthropology*, 20: 2, 271-301.
- Heidenheimer, Arnold/Johnston, Michael/LeVine, Victor (eds.) 1993: *Introduction*, in: *Political Corruption. A Handbook*, London: Transaction Publishers, 3-14.
- Knaup, Horand 2010: *Um Mitternacht im Palast, Der Spiegel*, 26.07.2010, <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-72370246.html>>(27.08.2012).
- Leys, Colin 1965: *What is the Problem About Corruption?*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 3: 2, 215-230.
- Mamdani, Mahmood 2004: *Citizen and Subject. Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Nye, Joseph 1993: *Corruption and Political Development. A Cost-Benefit Analysis*, in: Heidenheimer, Arnold/Johnston, Michael/Le Vine, Victor: *Political Corruption. A Handbook*, 963-984.
- Olivier de Sardan (OdS), Jean-Pierre 1999: *A Moral Economy of Corruption?*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37: 1, 25-52.
- Olivier de Sardan (OdS), Jean-Pierre 2004: *État, Bureaucratie et Gouvernance en Afrique de l'Ouest Francophone. Un Diagnostic Empirique, une Perspective Historique*, *Politique Africaine*, 96, 139-62.
- Philp, Mark 1997: *Defining Political Corruption*, *Political Studies*, XLV: 3, 436-462.
- Schlichte, Klaus and Veit, Alex 2010: *Drei Arenen. Warum Staatsbildung von Außen so Schwierig ist*, in: Bonacker, Thorsten/Daxner, Michael/Free, Jan/Zürcher, Christoph (eds.): *Interventionskultur. Zur Soziologie von Interventionsgesellschaften*, Wiesbaden: VS, 261-268.
- Tangri, Roger and Mwenda, Andrew 2008: *Elite Corruption and Politics in Uganda*, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 46: 2, 177-194.
- Tangri, Roger and Mwenda, Andrew 2006: *Politics, Donors and the Ineffectiveness of Anti-Corruption Institutions in Uganda*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 44: 1, 101-124.
- Tangri, Roger and Mwenda, Andrew 2005: *Patronage Politics, Donor Reforms, and Regime Consolidation in Uganda*, *African Affairs*, 104: 416, 449-467.
- Vian, Taryn 2009: *Benefits and Drawbacks of Per Diems. Do Allowances distort Good Governance in the Health Sector?*, Bergen: Anti-Corruption Research Centre, <[http://www.wcmi.no/publication\\_s/file/3523-benefits-and-drawbacks-of-per-diems.pdf](http://www.wcmi.no/publication_s/file/3523-benefits-and-drawbacks-of-per-diems.pdf)> (09.08.2012).