INTRODUCTION

Understanding corruption is one of the most urgent tasks of these deeply unsettled times. Corruption comes in many forms and afflicts impoverished, less developed countries as well as the world’s richest liberal democracies—from Brazil, where the “Car Wash” bribery scandal put a former president in prison to Pakistan where the family of an ousted prime minister was outed in the Panama Papers for offshore dealings to the United States where President Donald Trump has installed numerous advisors directly connected financially to the sector they oversee. Corruption shows few signs of abating. And, as protestors around the globe have taken to the streets, anti-system (aka “populist”) leaders have capitalized on their rage; even as, once in power, these leaders often make corruption worse. Perhaps now, more than ever in living memory, there is a pressing need to thoughtfully address corruption lest we allow would-be autocrats to continue creating the narrative for us.

To do so, we must answer these questions: How can we identify and track corruption and influencing in the environments in which we operate, observe, or study? How can we learn how corruption or influencing activities are organized and carried out in a given context or across contexts? And how can we effectively intervene? This Mapping Method offers an approach and guiding questions to help committed individuals—be they analysts, scholars, journalists, prosecutors, civil society organizations, or regular people—to investigate corruption and influencing in given cases.
Today, some 25 years since the inception of international anti-corruption regimes in the 1990s, many of those same regimes are reconsidering prevailing approaches to studying and countering corruption. Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars invested by the international financial institutions, individual governments, and NGOs in anti-corruption projects, there is scant evidence that the approaches undertaken have been effective. Corruption (and influencing activities), including the examples given above, cannot be adequately understood through the government (vs. private) sector or the country-centric unit of analysis that have framed much corruption work, nor through the survey, quantitative, metrics-focused, or modeling methods that have dominated corruption research and informed international anti-corruption efforts.

Momentum has been gathering for the need to “rethink corruption.” Today these approaches and methods are even less well-equipped to investigate and help combat corruption than when they were configured corruption studies a quarter century ago. There are two reasons for this. First, new forms of corruption and influencing have emerged amid the past few decades of privatization, deregulation, post-Cold-War dispersal of global authority and new, sparsely governed arenas; and digital revolution. These transformational developments have eroded boundaries between state and private spheres. They have unleashed informal, often transnational, social networks that play a greater role in governance and policy and interact in complex and opaque ways with hierarchies. Many of the players involved in grand corruption and influencing activities not only bridge and broker state and private sectors and work across countries; their influence derives from their ability to do so. Thus, frameworks that confine analysis to a specific country or to a state or private sector without examining how these sectors might be linked will miss the very drivers of corruption.

Second, and further complicating the analysis of corruption, is the more recent development over the past several years of anti-system movements and leaders such as President Trump who have unsettled the rule of law and a once-more stable global system. Inexperienced outsiders have been vaulted into some of the most powerful leadership roles in the world; outsider political parties less than a decade old are gaining parliamentary seats across Western democracies not long ago seen as stable and in “ungoverned spaces” such as new, fledgling states or post-conflict settings where authority is contested. While the above examples reference what has been called “grand” or “greed” corruption, the Mapping Method is also equipped to examine “need” corruption.

These two seismic developments mean that any rethinking of corruption and design of fresh approaches must thus not only mitigate previous flaws in framework and method; they must additionally take into account (1) these new forms of corruption; and (2) the fact that corruption is now often conducted against a political and legal backdrop in flux. This is true not just in the less developed countries where corruption has traditionally been most scrutinized but also in the most developed countries, which have been greatly under-examined in this regard.

This Mapping Method provides an antidote. Anchored in social anthropology, the approach departs conceptually and methodologically from prevailing frameworks. It is a grounded, real-world approach that begins by identifying the parties (players, networks, and organizations) in a corruption or influence effort. It then examines such factors as the parties’ agendas; the players’ interactions, networks, and roles vis-à-vis one another and in government, corporate, and other organizations; and the larger circumstances of power and resources in which the parties operate.

The Mapping Method is ideally equipped to investigate some of the most egregious and difficult-to-track corruption and influencing today. It works equally well in and across Western democracies not long ago seen as stable and in “ungoverned spaces” such as new, fledgling states or post-conflict settings where authority is contested. While the above examples reference what has been called “grand” or “greed” corruption, the Mapping Method is also equipped to examine “need” corruption.
GETTING STARTED
IDENTIFYING AN OVERARCHING QUESTION AND METHOD TO USE

We begin when corruption or undue influencing is suspected with regard to (a) given player(s), organization(s), or venue(s). With the Mapping Method, we then identify an overarching question for investigation.

Examples of such overarching questions are:

- How do residents of Karachi, Pakistan, get their water?
- What created decades of insecure supply, overpricing, and theft of public funds in the Tanzanian power sector?
- Who controlled and influenced specific policy decisions, including allowing exotic derivatives to remain unregulated, that led to the 2008 financial crisis?

After identifying the overarching research question, the Mapping Method then aims to address it through a series of empirical questions. To shed light on these questions, all manner of methods can be used that are useful in gathering information relevant to specific questions. The Mapping Method entails obtaining information from as many means and sources as are available—including open-ended interviews and ethnography; big data mining; public and off-the-record documents; media and investigative journalists’ accounts; regulatory agency findings; scholarly studies; and accounts and diaries of people involved in or adversely affected by corruption and influencing activities. These data must then be verified to the extent possible through cross-checking and triangulation of data.

It is important to note that mapping corruption and influence processes can start from different places; there is no one correct place to begin. While the list of questions below presents the conduct of an investigation in a particular order (beginning with the players), one could equally well start with (an) organization(s) and, in course of investigation, return to the players. If you know about (a) player(s) who may be involved, begin there. If you know instead about the involvement of (an) organization(s), or have been leaked information (for instance, about particular offshore accounts), then begin there. If you know people who are victims of corruption that disadvantages them (or if you are one of them), you can start by asking what their experience is—and what they know about the players and organizations who may be implicated—and go from there. If you have in your possession big data like the Panama Papers or you’ve been tipped off about a corruption activity or effort without specific names of players or organizations, you will still, at some point in your investigation, need to identify the involvements of players and organizations and explore these involvements.
While all three examples have been published (with regard to Pakistan, as a full-fledged case; with regard to Tanzania and the United States, as partial accounts that we have pieced together), the brief answers provided here are meant only to provide a rough summary; more comprehensive data and analysis can be found in the works from which they are drawn and other sources, many of which are cited in endnotes. Please note that the suggested format of the Mapping Method is to follow through only one case at a time; three examples are given here to provide a sense of the range of cases to which the approach can be applied.

After identifying an overarching question for investigation, the Mapping Method then proceeds to answer it by addressing the following six empirical questions. It is important to note that, while these questions can be approached in a linear fashion, the process of working through them and gathering information is seldom linear. The process might entail, for example, examining professional, social, and/or ideological affiliations or past influence efforts. Such examination might variously make use of direct observation or interviewing, thorough assessments of media accounts, consultations with scholars across several disciplines, social network analysis, and analysis of big data.

These examples are:

1. The distribution of water resources in Karachi, Pakistan, from the 1990s to the mid-2010s.
2. The conduct of energy policy players in Tanzania beginning in the mid-1990s and
3. The making of and deregulation of U.S. financial policy in the 1990s.
Who are the parties (players, social networks, and organizations) involved, both formally and informally, in a corruption or influence activity or effort?

“Players” are people who are actively involved, indeed the most influential or important people, in an organization, endeavor, mission, situation, or (series of) event(s). They are sometimes identified when their names keep appearing in conjunction with activities under study or through identification by others known to be involved. Some players can be found by determining who might have a financial, professional, or ideological stake in activities underway or being proposed. Please note that while some players have a formal role or title commensurate with their influence, crucially, many others do not.

In Karachi, a collection of players who have been dubbed the “water mafia” has been deemed more reliable than the formal water delivery service. This “mafia” has run an informal water delivery system that serves many of the city’s low-income residents. Players directly involved include water tanker operators and illegal hydrant owners, both entrepreneurs trying to make a living; government bureaucrats in the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board engaged in the water delivery racket; (usually low-level) police officers who facilitate the business through inaction or by taking bribes from the water mafia in exchange for the tacit support of the police; and members of state paramilitary forces who have also dipped their hands in the water racket business.

In Washington, players involved in 1990s deregulation of exotic derivatives under President Bill Clinton include a “power clique”—a small group of like-minded players whose members position themselves in state and private positions to achieve mutual goals. This was the Rubin power clique around former Goldman Sachs chief and Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin (from 1995 to 1999) and Rubin deputy Lawrence Summers, who became secretary when Rubin departed. Also playing crucial roles were Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Arthur Levitt, Jr., and allied Wall Street bankers.

In Tanzania, from the mid-1990s onwards, energy policy has been shaped by competing private interests, both from inside the country and abroad, which helped pushed through energy projects. Players include senior elected politicians up to the cabinet level; officials in the Ministry of Energy, among a number of other ministries; executives at the major state-owned utility TANESCO; judges; officials in the Bank of Tanzania; millionaire businessmen from both the local Asian and African communities, including James Rugemalira and Harbinder Singh Sethi, and entities they empowered; operatives from the ruling CCM party; representatives of a state-controlled newspaper and other media outlets; law firms; and overseas banks. Means of corruption have included bribery, kickbacks, the creation of shell companies, offshoring, money laundering, and outright theft of public funds. Meanwhile, Tanzanians have been faced with frequent power outages, misuse of public funds, overbilling, and an outmoded power plant and energy system.
In Karachi, the water mafia—in addition to encompassing operatives from the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board, the police, and paramilitary forces—has received de facto support from these organizations beyond the fact that these operatives are part of the influence network. Moreover, some of these government players are connected to political parties that support their illicit activities.

In Karachi, officials in the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board have additionally supported a particular political party through voting or even served as party activists. These same officials sometimes have also engaged directly in the water delivery racket by providing patronage to owners of illegal hydrants and by not reporting illegal hydrants to the local police.

In Washington, members of the Rubin power clique had circulated through top firms (especially Goldman Sachs), Harvard University, the Treasury Department, specific think tanks, corporate boards, advisory councils, and international governing bodies. Members of the clique and key allies held pivotal positions in the Treasury Department, the Federal Reserve, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Group of 30 international consultative group on banking standards, and top Wall Street firms.

In Tanzania, organizations and venues have included all organizations referred to above, as well as entities connected to the players. Law firms helped set up shell companies and overseas banks invested in disastrous or sham power projects over the years.

In Tanzania, beginning in the late 1980s, economic liberalization and the retirement of longtime President Julius Nyerere led to the rise of competing informal networks that encompassed government officials, parliamentary representatives, politicians, and members of the ruling CCM party. One of these networks, the Wanamtandao network, used patronage and propaganda to gain supremacy during the early years of the energy project debacles. The Wanamtandao network eventually weakened as the corruption was investigated; the prime minister, the ministers for Energy and Construction respectively, and other Wanamtandao members were forced out of government.

In Washington, as noted above, members of the Rubin power clique had been or were affiliated with the same top Wall Street firms, Harvard University, the Treasury Department, specific think tanks, corporate boards, advisory councils, and international governing bodies. This served to solidify both their joint agendas and the consensus view that what was good for Wall Street was good for regular people. In addition, many of the Washington policymakers had recently come from Wall Street (or would soon take a role there upon leaving public office). The clique’s close connections with Wall Street CEOs helped them form a bulwark against government officials whose roles indicated they should be centrally involved in decision making. A case in point is Brooksley Born, head of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, who was actively shut out of key consultations while top bankers and members of the power clique who did not occupy official positions were included.

Through what roles are the players linked to each other, and additionally, through what affiliations, organizations, or venues? How do these links, affiliations, organizations, and venues enable the corruption / influence activities or efforts?17
How do players use these organizations or venues as vehicles of influence? Do any of the players or organizations or venues use media (including social media) to enhance their power and message? If so, how, and what is achieved?

In Karachi, powerful players in the government have described the informal water delivery system to the media as being run by a “water mafia.” In doing so, they tarnish the system as criminal and distance themselves from the public perception that they are part of it. This characterization distorts the reality of the enterprise, which, though illicit, is more reliable than formal water delivery and receives de facto support from government officials and political parties.

In Tanzania, business interests penetrated the higher echelons of the governing CCM party, and the Wanamtandao network even created new positions to accommodate its business allies. This ensured that key members of parliament initially supported the deals and projects, despite disastrous public impact. The government-owned newspaper was described as a “loyal mouthpiece” for key player Rugemalira by one Tanzanian corruption-watcher and former member of parliament.

In Washington, members of the Rubin power clique and their allies used the nascent television business media, hungry for compelling hero narratives, to lionize themselves. This created an echo chamber in which questions about their economic stewardship and close connections with Wall Street were quickly dispelled, if they were asked at all. Specific think tanks and academic institutions followed suit.

In Tanzania, the Wanamtandao network had a deep reach, and in various directions. In addition to enlisting the support of people at the very top, cooptation went down to the level of a regional party chairman. Alliances were made, and media were worked to ensure favorable coverage. But as one extensive report on competing factions in Tanzania notes, “The paradox is that it may very well be that the success of the Wanamtandao [network] in co-opting a broad range of powerful actors was the source of its collapse.” The implication is that it was too large to sustain unity.

What are these players’ social network configurations (say, in terms of density) as they link to each other and to organizations and what features of the corruption/influence activity or effort are enabled by a specific configuration?

(For instance, the more density in a network or group, the more disincentive there is for players to defect from it and the more incentive for them to remain part of the network/group and continue their participation in corrupt activities. In another example, a social network configuration that features a single broker between two otherwise disconnected networks or groups [say, suppliers of illicit goods versus distributors] has these consequences: Having a single broker decreases the risk of discovery. At the same time, however, it increases the risk that business operations will be disrupted if the broker is discovered and removed.)
What are the parties’ respective interests, agendas, incentives, goals, motivations, operating assumptions, and expectations with regard to the corruption or influence activity /effort?

Please note that apart from helping to identify specific players, as mentioned above, understanding potential motives can help the researcher discern why the end result of certain actions does not serve the public interest, but some private agenda instead. It can also provide clues as to how players might proceed with future actions. Please also note that the parties’ interests can be difficult to discern and that the answer to this question is often revealed through actions. An official who takes a bribe is likely seeking financial gain. But, of course, this does not mean that money is his only motive; motives are not only often multifaceted; they can change over time and in response to shifting circumstances.

In Karachi, the players have been motivated either by financial gain, solidifying their institutional or political power, ensuring their physical safety (by maintaining political loyalties), or a combination of the above. Ministry officials control the city’s water, as well as the money for development projects. Because positions in the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board are highly contested among political parties, how these officials deploy resources stands to benefit particular political parties financially and politically. Involvement in the water delivery racket not only reaps lucrative profits; providing water to neighborhoods populated by constituents who, in turn, contribute their political support to specific political parties, yields political profit.

In Tanzania, the motivation of the Wamantandao network was to maintain supremacy over the other informal networks and to ensure the continuance of fundraising for CCM leaders. Parties involved in the various energy projects benefited financially and kept their positions of power and influence, until accusations of widespread corruption finally fractured the network.

In Washington, the players promoted a “free market” ideology, insisting that the policies that greatly enriched Wall Street were also helping regular people. Wall Street firms eagerly embraced the so-called New Democrats, notably President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, as privatizers, deregulators, pro-business, and pro-Wall Street. The business press (and sometimes the general press as well), academic and think tank economists, and Wall Street players formed a cross-venue consensus that a low regulation and low inflation environment was ideal.
What is the ecosystem in which the various parties operate and how does it affect their corruption / influence efforts? What are the “culture(s)” and mindsets of the milieus, organization(s), or venues in which the parties operate (such as norms and mindsets of a community of practice, norms and ethics of a profession, mafia honor codes) and how do these affect their corruption / influence efforts?

Please note that if you do not understand that different milieus / ecosystems possess different cultural and professional mindsets, and that they constrain and enable agendas and activities that can be vastly different from one another, you are likely to miss the ability to understand motives and agendas. It is important to have both a day-to-day understanding of milieu, as well as a larger and longer-term view. It should be helpful to consult scholars and historians of the region and journalists on the ground.
Who are the parties’ sponsors (such as funders or providers of other indispensable resources) and what are their interests, agendas, incentives, goals, motivations, operating assumptions, and expectations with regards to the corruption or influence activity/effort?

Note that “sponsors” can overlap with or be the same as “players” or “organizations.” Please also note that sometimes players involved in an influence effort benefit directly from their actions, but additionally that various sponsors are involved and also benefit. Sponsors’ involvement must be understood to explain why certain decisions are being made, a baffling decision becomes less so when you can determine that a player is satisfying a sponsor’s directive. Because players often have a vested interest in obscuring their sponsorship, answering this question can be difficult. Thus it might be necessary to employ multiple methods to adequately investigate this issue.
What are the larger context(s) / circumstances of power and resources in which the parties are embedded (such as the broader geopolitical landscape, money laundering regulations and enforcement [or lack thereof], availability of huge amounts of “dark” money from informal / unrecorded economic transactions)? How do features of the larger context(s) / circumstances constrain, enable, or otherwise affect the parties involved in corruption / influence efforts?

In Karachi, political instability and the real possibility that key elected leaders would be unseated in the next election has motivated the players to try to maximize their spoils in a short time period. The 1990s in particular were marked by a succession of democratic governments, which were then dismissed. With high levels of violence, political affiliation came to guarantee jobs and physical safety. During that decade Karachi’s residents also experienced a big gap between their daily water needs and water availability. The political instability led to uncertainty about the prospects of particular political parties and contributed to the parties’ persistent fear that, despite being in power, their governments could be removed through quasi-legal or legal measures—culminating in the coup perpetrated by General Pervez Musharraf. Both before and after his military rule, because governments seldom completed a full term, political parties, government functionaries, and entrepreneurs concentrated on making quick financial and political gains. The urgency of securing their “share” of the pie motivated all players to perform their respective roles with dispatch.

In Tanzania, the arrival of multi-party politics along with economic liberalization created a scramble for resources from the mid-1980s onwards. One of the side effects of this was a huge increase in the informal, unrecorded economy, creating a vast reservoir of dark money. Dark money then served as a source of capital flight and unrecorded domestic investment—investment that was never included in national accounts.

In Washington, President Clinton inherited an economy coming out of recession, having beaten his predecessor, President George H.W. Bush, with the line, “It’s the Economy, Stupid.” Pro-Wall Street Democrats were a new breed, and, armed with elite credentials, these players were well-positioned to push their agenda unimpeded, to a fawning press. While players seemed to truly believe the free-market ideology they touted, the result was a vast concentration of wealth among Wall Street allies, personal riches for the policy players who came from and went on to take Wall Street jobs, and the impoverishment for millions after these policy catastrophes came home to roost amid the 2008 financial crisis.
To what extent is the structure that facilitates corrupt activities or efforts institutionalized (or becoming so) even if it remains informal/unincorporated and the players change over time?

Please note that addressing this question helps to determine the extent to which the identified corruption or influencing might be intractable or not. Clues that corruption has become institutionalized include statements from those involved along the lines of “this is just how things work.” If activities persist even as the players change, that is a strong indication of institutionalized corruption.
The Mapping Method provides a flexible approach to understanding and hence to countering corruption. It meets corruption how and where it happens. It enables us to sort out parties’ relationships, activities, and interactions and allows them to tell the story, rather than fitting the data into a preconceived framework. The approach can deal with both simple and highly complex forms of corruption, as chains of corruption that weave through multiple social networks, organizations, and countries over time.

While at first glance the Mapping Method might appear to be a “micro” approach in that it hones in on specific players, organizations, and contexts, many of the contexts in which it is employed might sound more “macro” (for instance, the Tanzanian or Washington examples). In fact, the approach is neither micro nor macro and it is both. Common frameworks deployed to study corruption (such as macro vs. micro, state vs. private, formal vs. informal) and a focus on countries as the unit of analysis can distort the field of vision and blind analysts to the actual drivers of corruption. A huge benefit of the Mapping Method is that it does not delimit data in such potentially biased ways. This benefit is especially relevant when it comes to investigating complex forms of corruption.

Your feedback and comments are enthusiastically welcomed.
This example was substantially drafted by Lawrence Cockcroft and further informed by sources cited in the endnotes.

This example was written up in Janine R. Wedel’s UNACCOUNTABLE: How the Establishment Corrupted Our Finances, Freedom, and Politics and Created an Outsider Class, New York, NY: Pegasus, 2014, pp. 182-3 and 64.73. Supporting evidence can be found in these pages and in the corresponding endnotes.


Sources for this example include Lawrence Cockcroft, who helped draft the text on Tanzania, as well as these references and specific subjects:

- Donors’ withholding of aid—up to 30 percent of its budget, one of the highest in the continent—due to corruption: Kizito Makoye, “Tanzania vows to charge more officials over energy scandal,” Reuters, Jan. 17, 2015, https://jal.reuters.com/article/energyOilNews/idAFI1N0UW0G20150117

Some generic examples of this might be: (1) An organized crime ring that funds a political group in power in exchange for exemption from judicial scrutiny; (2) government procurement officials who award government contracts in exchange for kickbacks; (3) police or military personnel or units who tip off or protect corruption rackets from adverse consequences in exchange for kickbacks; (4) funders of political campaigns who hope to receive favors if these candidates are elected; and (5) executives of a multinational corporation collaborating with a country’s political elites to minimize recorded profits and award government contracts in exchange for kickbacks; (6) funders of political campaigns who hope to receive favors if these candidates are elected; and (5) executives of a multinational corporation collaborating with a country’s political elites to minimize recorded profits and award government contracts in exchange for kickbacks.

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