PREVENTING CORRUPTION BY EMPOWERING CITIZENS

More than one billion people have to pay a bribe each year to get public services to which they are entitled, because the power to deliver them rests in the hands of corrupt public officials. While such bad apples are a minority of public officials, social science surveys show there are enough globally to victimize almost one in four families using public services. Since health care, education and police protection are important in reducing poverty and developing human capital, corruption undermines countries achieving their Millennium Development Goals. It also undermines trust in government and breeds political apathy and disruptive protest behaviour.

Recommendations to reduce corruption usually address "big bucks" contracts worth millions to corporations and a small number of corrupt policymakers. However, they do not reach the grass-roots delivery of public services in schools, hospitals and municipal offices scattered nationwide. Formal entitlements of citizens to these services are not only controlled by nationally determined bureaucratic rules but also by the discretion of local officials who can decide whether to follow these rules or use their discretion to extract a bribe or "tip" before doing so

The best way to prevent corruption is to take power out of the hands of public officials and give it to citizens. The spread of information technology enables citizens to get all sorts of documents from online merchants around the clock seven days a week. Queuing is a transparent means for supermarkets and their customers for deciding the order in which people check out. The same technology can enable citizens to enjoy self-service for such documents as a license for their car. School examinations on which the future of youths depends can be administered online and marked by impersonal and distant computers rather than local officials. Publishing results online can enable local citizens to see whether the competitive allocation of places in schools goes to youth who know the most or to those who pay the most to officials who take decisions.

Making more use of information technology is consistent with the original purpose of bureaucracy: replacing arbitrary decisions by impersonal rules. It is also consistent with the contemporary principle that public services should empower citizens to claim their rights rather than be exploited by public servants who want to use public services to help themselves.