ON THE DEFINITION OF CORRUPTION

Mikayel AVETISYAN, PhD

There are many definitions for corruption in professional literature that do not discover the essence of it in all its complication. Till now the scholars who have been engaged in the study of this phenomenon have proposed myriad of definitions. Some of them are too narrow and describe corruption regarding its common features, others are a bit wider but still can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Defining corruption becomes even more difficult against the background of cultural, political, and legal dissimilarities between different states. This paper discusses several main definitions of corruption commonplace in literature with the suggestion of a new alternative one, which tends to be more general, comprehensive and understandable.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Main Definitions of Corruption

First of all, let us see what definitions are given in several English-language dictionaries to explain corruption. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines it as “dishonest or illegal behavior, especially of people in authority.”¹ Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary puts it as “inducement to wrong by improper or unlawful means …”² It is evident that these definitions are incomplete. The first definition does not show the reason of such conduct, and the second does not explain what actually begets the inducement.

The Lectric Law Library’s Lexicon develops further the idea defining corruption as “an act done with [...] intent to give some advantage inconsistent with official duty and the rights of others. Sometimes it is understood as something against law…(italics mine).”³ We can make up a conclusion from these definitions that corruption is an activity which is not legal and supposed to be a crime; so the definition must include the statement about illegality of corruption – a feature omitted in some definitions to be discussed also below.

The most widespread definition of corruption is “the misuse [also abuse] of public office [also power or influence] for private gain [or benefit].”⁴ This definition is the product of the long research tradition, which has often traces back to Nye’s original definition of corruption.⁵

Nye defines corruption as “behavior, which deviates from the formal duties of a public role [i.e. abuse of public post] because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique”) pecuniary or status (emphasis added) gains.”⁶

In this definition Nye enumerates in the parentheses what he means by saying “private-regarding”. In the elaborated condensed version the word “private” can easily be misinterpreted as “personal”, whereas the gains received by means of corruption can pass on a group as well (see Tanzi, 1998; Chinhamo, Shumba 2007).
Thus we suggest defining corruption also as an activity that serves individual and group interests.

Nye (1989) also touches upon the nature of benefit obtained from corruption both in material (pecuniary) and moral (status) terms. The omission of this aspect do not reveal the purpose of corruption, consequently the definitions ignoring this factor are not complete. Furthermore, it should be mentioned in the definition, that these gains are ill-gotten.

Bardhan considers the corruption to be a situation when “… an official (the agent) entrusted with carrying out a task by the public (the principal) engages in some sort of malfeasance for private enrichment, which is difficult to monitor (italics mine) for the principal.”

In this article the author shows another peculiarity of corruption. The expression “difficult to monitor” reveals the its clandestine essence. But mentioning only “private enrichment” in this definition Bardhan does not show the moral gains got from corruption – a thing Nye does.

Susan Rose-Ackerman tries to present the stimuli of corruption. She thinks that it “…occurs at the interface of the public and private sectors. Whenever a public official has discretionary power over distribution to the private sector of a benefit or cost, incentives of bribery are created. Thus corruption depends upon the magnitude of the benefits and costs under the control of public officials. Private individuals and firms are willing to pay to obtain these benefits and to avoid the costs.” The shortcoming of this statement is that the meaning of the word “costs” may be simply interpreted as “expenses”. But it is trivial that by means of corruption one can avoid not only pecuniary but also, for instance, civil obligations.

The IMF’s Fiscal Affairs Department’s Director Vito Tanzi thinks that corruption exists not only in the public office but also in large private enterprises and in private activities regulated by the government. So we can conclude that corruption is not only abuse of public but also private office.

The Anti-corruption Plain Guide (July 2009) of Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted (emphasis added) power for private gain.” “Entrusted power” can include public and private sectors, but we think that the latter must be singled out.

In the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP) Anti-Corruption Practice Note the corruption is defined as “… the misuse of public office for private gain. It encompasses abuses by government officials such as embezzlement and nepotism, as well as abuses linking public and private actors such as bribery, extortion, influence peddling, and fraud. Corruption arises in both political and bureaucratic offices and can be petty or grand, organized or unorganized.” The main advantage of this definition is that it shows how corruption is being committed. This statement should be incorporated into the definition of corruption to vividly manifest the methods of its implementation.
Chinhamo and Shumba (2007) propose the corruption to be defined as “the abuse or complicity (italics mine) in the abuse of private or public power, office or resources for personal gain.” The authors stress on the participation in the abuse of entrusted power widening the scopes of definition.

Proposal of Combined Definition

Summarizing all ideas about corruption we suggest defining it as secretly committed unlawful collusive and/or coercive abuse of public and/or private office, power, and resources for personal and/or common material and/or non-material gains by means of embezzlement, nepotism, as well as bribery, extortion, influence peddling, and fraud.

Though we believe that this definition is more comprehensive, general and understandable, it may be complemented by other statements regarding the specific features of corruption.

Endnotes

5. Ibid.
6. A small, exclusive group of friends or associates.