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## Making government anti-corruption hotlines effective

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# Working Paper



## Making Government Anti-Corruption Hotlines Effective

Anti-corruption hotlines provide a key channel for governments to receive complaints from individuals who have come into contact with or been victims of corruption. Increasingly, hotlines are being valued as a channel for citizen redress and as a barometer of the success of government anti-corruption efforts. They provide for broad feedback to governments from civil society on how well policies and institutions are working, where breakdowns occur and where responses are needed. As a service, hotlines are similar to community audits and legal advice centres in offering a means to cross-check whether campaign pledges and government promises are producing results. Yet their success in combating corruption is dependent on a number of operational, administrative, institutional and political factors — each of which this paper will attempt to address by drawing on examples from Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, Kenya and Moldova.

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## Understanding the Study

At the end of 2008, four country studies — Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, Kenya and Moldova — were commissioned to examine the operational, administrative, institutional and political characteristics of government anti-corruption hotlines. In total, 14 government hotlines that have been tasked to receive corruption complaints were assessed. Hotlines marked with an asterisk (\*) were exclusively for reporting corruption while the others in the study also dealt with other reported service problems:

*Azerbaijan:* Ministry of Education,\* Social Protection Fund, Ministry of Taxes and Prosecutor's Office.

*Czech Republic:* Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Interior.\*

*Moldova:* Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, Tax Authority, Customs Service, Ministry of Interior, Anti-Corruption and Economic Crimes Centre\* and Prosecutor's Office.\*

*Kenya:* Anti-corruption Commission (KACC).\*

Based on good practice, ten areas were selected for assessment:

- general characteristics of hotline (budget, staff and training, year created, publicity, etc.);
- mechanisms used to track complaints;
- the mandate and capacity of the hotline;
- administrative and institutional structures;
- level of political will;
- accountability and transparency;
- protection of victims and witnesses;
- public trust and credibility;
- nature of relationship with civil society; and
- perceived key drivers to improve the hotline's overall effectiveness.

Each area had a series of follow-up questions based on other good practice examples. To compile the results, two sets of interviews — with current hotline staff as well as a sample of hotline users — were organised by the TI national chapters participating in the study.

## 1. Why a hotline?

It has been nearly a decade since governments began using anti-corruption hotlines as a mechanism for citizens to report on alleged cases of corruption. The increased penetration of mobile phones and the internet have allowed hotlines to reach an even wider group of citizens. For example, SMS (short message service) numbers — either offered free-of-charge or with low-user costs — can be used to publicise the hotline's service (as in Indonesia) or alert the authorities to a problem, such as the non-delivery of medicines or the demanding of a bribe. Tailored hotline services often offer users multiple reporting channels, either through their mobile phone, an online application form or via email.<sup>1</sup>

The 14 government hotlines covered in this comparative study of four countries exemplify three organisational models (see side bar). They have been established either as part of a national anti-corruption body (Kenya and Moldova), within a state agency, such as the education ministry (Azerbaijan), or for a particular sector, like the judiciary (Czech Republic). In all four countries in this study, hotlines function as the outreach arm of a government institution or body and are not organisationally distinct.

## 2. What makes a hotline successful?

Although the hotlines assessed operate in different national contexts, some common success factors can be identified across all four countries. These broadly fall along operational, administrative, institutional and political lines. The commonalities are consistent across hotlines, regardless of the agency authorised to operate them and the nature of the complaints received.

### Operational

If it is to function as an effective tool to address corruption, a hotline needs both to promote its services and set up interfaces for easy public access. In Moldova and Azerbaijan, the hotlines regularly publicise their services, using posters as well as TV, radio programmes, the internet and local papers. Some of the government hotlines in Azerbaijan that focus on a specific sector also advertise in related media outlets, such as the national tax and education journals.

To increase access and knowledge about government hotlines in operation, it is essential to understand the barriers that users encounter. These may be geographical, technical, economic or socio-cultural (e.g. relating to gender, ethnicity, educational level and language). Yet going local does not necessarily guarantee an increased use or understanding of hotlines. In Kenya, where the anti-corruption agency and its hotline have initiated regional operations, a survey of citizens — in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu — revealed that only 33 per cent knew of the hotline's existence despite a high public knowledge of corruption issues and government efforts to publicise the service.<sup>2</sup>

The use of hotlines by victims and witnesses of corruption will also be conditioned by the hotline's own capacity constraints — human, technical and financial. In terms of resources, adequate and specified funding (i.e. being included as a budgetary line item) is needed to encourage freedom in budgetary decisions and the accountability of the hotline's operations. However, Kenya's hotline, which is operated by the anti-corruption commission, does not have a separate funding line. Part of the logic is that the hotline is in the function of the commission and its activities fall under the commission's general work.

In terms of technical skills, staff need to have a good knowledge base of the legal issues that they are addressing and be trained (or have a background) in the evidentiary requirements for investigating cases. They must also know how to protect against acts of bad faith in the reporting process, such as a disgruntled employee making a baseless or false claim against a co-worker or superior.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Czech Republic, the four-member staff of the #199 hotline has received legal training and signed a code of ethics which governs their work.

Additionally, appropriate staffing can help improve a hotline's effectiveness and individuals' use of it. International experience has shown that staff members cannot adequately handle more than eight to ten substantive calls in an eight-hour day.<sup>4</sup> In the four countries studied, the number of permanent staff per hotline ranges from zero to nine, with some staffing patterns based on periods of higher caller demand. For example, the hotline run by the ministry of taxes in Azerbaijan increases its staff numbers during the tax filing period to accommodate the nearly 300 calls received daily.<sup>5</sup>

### *Administrative*

The country studies revealed a wide disparity in the level of systematic complaint screening and processing procedures undertaken as part of a hotline's administration. Apart from the Czech Republic, there was generally a lack of clear steps that hotline staff members followed when responding to a complaint. This is troubling given the importance of providing advice to individuals reporting corruption about their rights and what will happen if an investigation is triggered (see side bar).

When running a hotline, protecting victims and witnesses of corruption poses a special set of concerns related to assurances that the claimants will be insulated from reprisals or negative consequences — from the government or within their work place or community. This is particularly acute for whistleblower cases as most countries, including all four in the study, lack legislation to safe guard individuals who are reporting corruption.

Although reporting anonymously can make following-up on cases difficult and increases risks for false complaints, it is generally seen as important that hotline users can withhold their identity. In Azerbaijan, the hotlines run by the ministries of taxes and education allow for anonymous reporting as way to encourage

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### **Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres (ALACs): Informing Individuals of their Rights**

Since 2003, Transparency International has been working with national chapters to establish legal outreach and advice centres for individuals who have witnessed or been a victim of corruption.

By visiting, calling or writing to one of the Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres (ALACs), which currently operate in nearly 35 countries, people can find out about their legal rights for taking action on cases of corruption. ALAC staff can assist the person to file a complaint or help them to blow the whistle on cases of corruption.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years, these centres have helped people to come forward and report cases of corruption. They have received tens of thousands of calls that involve corruption at all levels — from the highest to the lowest government ranks.

ALACS also work with government institutions and line departments on how to respond to citizens' complaints about corruption.

For example, the ALAC in Guatemala collaborated with the National Customs Office to resolve a wave of citizen complaints about bribery being used to price gouge consumers. Callers to the ALAC expressed concern that there were irregularities happening at a certain customs point on the Mexico-Guatemala border, resulting in contraband gasoline being brought into the country and sold illegally. In response, the ALAC worked with the National Customs Office to hold citizen working groups on the problem and strengthen the enforcement of customs regulations.

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### **Hotline Use in Moldova and Czech Republic**

In the case of Moldova, the ministry of health's hotline, with four employees, receives over 1.200 calls per month. The high caller volume is considered a reflection of the sector being one of the more problematic in Moldova and a service that the population frequently comes into contact with, through doctors, hospitals and other medical services.

In the Czech Republic, there is significant disparity in the levels of use and user satisfaction of the main anti-corruption hotlines. The hotline supported by the ministry of interior and run by the Transparency International national chapter receives ten times more the number of complaints than the hotline overseen by the ministry of justice (60 versus six calls per month). Research suggests that this could be considered a reflection of differences in trust, service and outreach, underscoring the importance of staff training and publicity.

citizens to use them. In Kenya, the anti-corruption commission has set up a 'virtual' internet hotline where individuals can anonymously report cases of corruption, in addition to voicing complaints through calls, letters or in person.

Once a complaint has been received by the hotline, it is important to set out the process for advancing cases to the point of closure. This can be facilitated by using a data management system to track cases. In the Czech Republic, the main government hotline (#199) uses a database which has been created for the TI national chapter to log users of its Advocacy and Legal Advice Centre (ALAC). Some countries, including Moldova and Kenya, legally require that case monitoring be done.

As part of monitoring efforts, the hotline and/or its host institution should publish reports on their operations. Information includes the number of cases that are referred to investigative authorities (such as the police, prosecutor's office, auditor or ombudsperson) and their outcomes (e.g. disciplinary action, sanctions and prosecution). In Kenya, the national anti-corruption commission publishes online its annual report of activities, including a statistical summary of all cases forwarded to the attorney general and their status ([www.kacc.go.ke](http://www.kacc.go.ke)).

### *Institutional*

A hotline's independence will depend on the institutional powers enjoyed by the ministry or agency that oversees it. Typically, hotlines have greater autonomy to act on cases when the person with the authority to appoint (and dismiss) the hotline unit head has a relatively higher level position within the home institution. This is a characteristic which usually affords the hotline a greater degree of independence and freedom from capture by mid-level managers.

The authority to investigate claims — if it exists at all — will also be derived from the mandate of the institution that administers the hotline and its institutional role within the government. For example, the anti-corruption hotline for the ministry of justice in the Czech Republic does not have the authority to investigate although it does have the power to follow-up on cases it has referred to the police. In Kenya, the anti-corruption hotline is managed by the Investigations and Asset Tracing Directorate. Any report that the Kenyan hotline receives which requires investigation is passed over to the directorate's own investigators.

Where they have a remit to investigate claims, it is important hotlines have the commensurate capacity and that the steps for investigation are clearly outlined (see side bar). In Azerbaijan, claims of corruption made against the ministry of education (which runs the hotline) can be investigated by the hotline's administration. If a criminal act has been committed, however, cases must be forwarded to law enforcement authorities and the prosecutor's office.

### Political

It is important that hotlines are not manipulated and used for purposes other than what they have been designed: to allow individuals who have been a witness to or victim of corruption to report the abuse and have an effective method of redress.

The experiences of setting up government hotlines in the four countries studied highlight the importance of having explicit government support for tackling corruption in the country. In some countries, this commitment has been mixed — in spite of policies (such as anti-corruption initiatives and freedom of information acts) that would suggest otherwise.

Lack of public trust both in the government's overall commitment to fighting corruption and the hotline is an issue in all the countries studied. This finding is reflected in recent public opinion surveys which show that less than 25 per cent of people polled in each of the four countries felt that their government was effective at fighting corruption.<sup>7</sup> A credibility gap may also result when the hotline and its home institution do not have the appropriate powers to address the complaints received. For example in Moldova, two of the hotlines assessed — run by the ministry of health and the customs service — noted that they lacked sufficient authority to deal with politically sensitive cases. In other instances, lack of credibility may be a reflection of the ineffectiveness of other relevant government bodies — such as the courts — to apply existing laws and sanctions.

Partnering with a civil society organisation can help to improve the credibility of a hotline. In the Czech Republic, the government has contracted the local chapter of Transparency International to run its national anti-corruption hotline. Another collaborative model has been used in Azerbaijan where local youth organisations and the national chapter of TI were invited to contribute staff to the government's anti-corruption hotline for the ministry of education. In most of the countries studied, the existence of a civil society-run or partnered hotline is considered to have helped to improve the government's own operations by providing individuals with another, competitive channel for raising complaints.

### 3. How to make a hotline effective: Lessons learned

The 'effectiveness' of a government hotline is viewed as a composite function of its operational, administrative, institutional and political dimensions. The recommendations offered below for each of these components take into account the experiences profiled in Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, Kenya and Moldova and international lessons learned from good practice. The aim of this section is to provide a road map to understand the actions and features that can promote a hotline's effectiveness.

#### Operational

- 📢 *Promote public awareness of hotline services.* For countries with low literacy rates, publicity in the local language(s) on community radio and

#### Kenya's Government Anti-Corruption Hotline

Kenya's anti-corruption commission, which operates the hotline, was set up by an act of parliament known as the Anti-Corruption and Economic Crimes Act (2003).

The Commission is directly responsible to parliament and has the powers to investigate "any matters or conduct constituting corruption or economic crime," although it does not have the mandate to prosecute.<sup>8</sup>

For cases that fall outside of its responsibilities, which account for 80 per cent of the 5,200 reports received through its hotline, the Commission refers them to the appropriate agencies.<sup>9</sup> The remainder (20 per cent) are pursued by the Commission for follow-up investigations.

### Anonymous Reporting Channels

There are two ways to report anonymously through hotlines. Firstly, an individual can make an anonymous telephone call or provide 'untraceable' information to the hotline's office or staff. However, in some countries, such as Azerbaijan and Liberia, legislation does not allow the prosecutor to act on anonymous complaints.

Secondly, a victim or witness can come forward but ask s/he is not identified in formal records during the investigation. The challenge in this case is to respect and guarantee confidentiality and anonymity as a corruption complaint moves forward, particularly if it involves politically and economically powerful individuals.

In terms of legal frameworks, whistleblower laws can help to lower fears around personal security and protection from retribution.<sup>10</sup> This has been the experience in countries such as the United States and United Kingdom that have had whistleblower protection laws for a number of years.

For the second type of anonymous reporting to function in practice, clear data protection measures and a high level of institutional independence on the part of the hotline and its host institution are required.

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television programmes is an important component of the outreach strategy.

- 🌐 *Create a client-friendly and responsive environment.* This includes having operators and staff that can speak more than one of the main languages in the country, mechanisms for responding to after-hour calls, as well as simple requirements, such as having ample staff to answer the volume of calls received.
- 🌐 *Ensure staff training.* All staff must have the ability to assess the complaints being raised, to formulate questions to assist the caller and to provide information on a caller's rights (if the complaint is advanced as a case).
- 🌐 *Designate specific funding.* Budgets for hotlines should be clearly identified and separated on their own budget line within their host ministry or agency's funding.

### Administrative

- 🌐 *Protect the rights of sources to remain anonymous and file a report confidentially.* The right to report anonymously is an important consideration but is dependent on national legal frameworks, including whether there are provisions protecting whistleblowers and anonymous complainants (see side bar).
- 🌐 *Standardise procedures for handling and processing complaints.* These should include establishing a check list for screening and advancing complaints.
- 🌐 *Set time clear time limits for responding to queries and complaints.* These should be reasonable given the type of responses needed and should be made known to users.
- 🌐 *Establish and define in formal and legal terms when a case is considered 'resolved' and 'closed'.* Dimensions to consider when setting this condition are: a country's applicable legislation; the level of evidence required for a complaint's 'permissibility' before the law; requirements for referring the complaint to other responsible authorities; and the desire of the complainant to pursue the case.
- 🌐 *Set up data management systems.* Systems should capture information that can be used to monitor the cases and sectors affected, creating a risk map of troubled services or institutions.
- 🌐 *Regularly publish information on hotline performance.* Basic information in the report should include how many calls were received, what percentage was resolved immediately and what share required follow-up.

### ***Institutional***

- 🌐 *Outline investigative responsibilities.* For hotline staff, this involves knowing what level of evidence is required under the law to trigger an investigation and which powers within the hotline, ministry and government (i.e. the prosecutor's office) should be notified.

### ***Political***

- 🌐 *Promote the hotline's independence from political or administrative interference.* It is essential that the hotline service is seen as safe, impartial and not at the political favour of anyone or at the mercy of an agency's directors.
- 🌐 *Establish linkages with civil society.* Civil society partnerships can enhance credibility and increase levels of trust, as well as improve the performance of the hotline.

In reviewing the lessons learned from the study, the common finding is the importance of equally tackling these four dimensions when setting up and running a hotline. For example, ample budgets and advertising will not improve the service if staff members answering the calls are not properly trained. Even specially-designated anti-corruption hotlines might not work if the prevailing levels of political will and trust are not adequate. For hotlines to bring the voice of the people closer to the government on how well it is doing, it is essential that these recommended features are assessed, addressed and strengthened. 🌐

## Making government anti-corruption hotlines effective

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To learn about TI's efforts on combating corruption, visit: [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org).

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### References:

<sup>1</sup> Some companies such as SGS and international organisations like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development have the majority of their corruption complaints received through the internet and email. More information is available at: [www.ebrd.com/about/integrity/compl/about.htm](http://www.ebrd.com/about/integrity/compl/about.htm) and [www.sgs.com/about\\_sgs/compliance\\_report\\_form.htm](http://www.sgs.com/about_sgs/compliance_report_form.htm).

<sup>2</sup> TI Kenya used stakeholder consultations constructed around roundtable discussions on corruption in these three cities to do a random sample survey of individual knowledge about the hotline. The Kenyan government has billboards and ads for this and other anti-corruption hotlines posted in many cities. High profile cases in Kenya, such as the Anglo-Leasing scandal, and good press coverage has meant that Kenyans are broadly aware of the problem and affected by it. According to Transparency International, 37 per cent of Kenyans reported paying a bribe in the last year. See: TI, Global Corruption Barometer 2009 (Berlin, Germany: Transparency International, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see: U4 Network, U4 Helpdesk Query, 'Anti-corruption hotlines', (Bergen, Norway: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2006). Available at: [www.u4.no/helpdesk/helpdesk/queries/query109.cfm](http://www.u4.no/helpdesk/helpdesk/queries/query109.cfm).

<sup>4</sup> See: Public Service Commission. Public Service Commission Report on Anti-Corruption Hotlines (Cape Town, South Africa: Public Service Commission, April 2002).

<sup>5</sup> While the ministry of taxes does not operate a dedicated anti-corruption hotline, it does welcome and receive corruption complaints. Between 2007 and 2008, the hotline for the ministry of taxes in Azerbaijan received a total of 323.280 calls.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on ALACs, see:

[www.transparency.org/global\\_priorities/other\\_thematic\\_issues/alacs](http://www.transparency.org/global_priorities/other_thematic_issues/alacs).

<sup>7</sup> Findings are from the Global Corruption Barometer 2009. In response to the question "How would you assess your current government's actions in the fight against corruption," only 1 per cent in the Czech Republic said they were effective. The results for Moldova, Kenya and Azerbaijan were: 9 per cent, 24 per cent and 14 per cent. See: TI, Global Corruption Barometer 2009, (Berlin, Germany: Transparency International, 2009). [www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/qcb/2009](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/qcb/2009).

<sup>8</sup> See: Republic of Kenya. The Governance, Justice, Law & Order Sector (GJLOS) Reform Programme. [www.gjlos.go.ke/qjinner.asp?pcat2=agencies&pcat=miniust&cat=kacc](http://www.gjlos.go.ke/qjinner.asp?pcat2=agencies&pcat=miniust&cat=kacc).

<sup>9</sup> See: The Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission, Annual Report 2007/2008 (Nairobi, Kenya: KACC, 2009). [www.kacc.go.ke/whatsnew.asp?id=142](http://www.kacc.go.ke/whatsnew.asp?id=142).

<sup>10</sup> See: Public Service Commission, Report on Anti-Corruption Hotlines (Pretoria, South Africa: Public Service Commission, April 2002). Available at: [www.psc.gov.za/docs/reports/2002/hotlines/01.pdf](http://www.psc.gov.za/docs/reports/2002/hotlines/01.pdf).

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