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## CORRUPTION: THREATS AND TRENDS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Contrary to popular belief, free markets and non-interventionism are not remedies for corruption. No system is entirely free of corruption. Furthermore, corruption exacerbates the already difficult circumstances of States in conflict situations and those with economies in transition. It is widely accepted that corruption is an impediment to development. If not addressed as a priority, it may hinder all other efforts to effectively advance the development agenda, both at the international and the national level. At a minimum, the fight against corruption requires unconditional commitment from the political leadership and a corruption-free judiciary.

### Threats and trends

*Political corruption* covers a wide range of practices from irregular party and election financing and vote buying to trading in influence by politicians and elected public officials.

*Corruption within the justice system* threatens its independence, impartiality and fairness and undermines the rule of law—key prerequisites for economic growth and the reduction of poverty. Corruption within the justice system also has a negative effect on economic development and discourages direct foreign investment.

*Corruption in the private sector* has long been considered part of doing business. However, the private sector has come to understand the risks of corruption: it distorts fair competition and the rules of a free market economy, has a negative impact on the quality of products and services, weakens the prospects for economic investment and undermines business ethics.

*Asset looting and laundering of corruption proceeds* present a major challenge to the international

community and have the potential to destroy entire national economies and weaken development. They undermine foreign aid and free trade, drain currency reserves, reduce the tax base, harm competition and increase poverty levels. Looted assets typically derive from two sorts of activities: bribery and embezzlement of state assets.

*Corruption and conflict:* in many cases, corruption has been found to prolong conflicts and impede post-conflict reconstruction and institution-building.

### United Nations Convention against Corruption

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which entered into force in September 2003, includes provisions related to the criminalization of corruption by public officials. However, in order to properly address the multi-faceted phenomenon of corruption, the General Assembly decided that an independent and more comprehensive international legal instrument was necessary. Accordingly, the United Nations Convention against Corruption was successfully negotiated in less than two years and opened for signature in December 2003. It has since been signed by 118 States and ratified by 18. It will enter into force after 30 countries ratify it. States will be given the opportunity to deposit instruments of ratification or accession to the Convention during the Crime Congress in Bangkok, Thailand.

Once ratified, the Convention will become the first global instrument in the fight against corruption. It contains a wide array of prevention measures and a chapter dedicated to the criminalization of specific manifestations of corruption. The Convention calls for international cooperation in criminal matters, including technical assistance and

information exchange. In a major breakthrough, the Convention contains specific provisions on asset recovery.

### Responses to threats and trends

Prevention is one of the pillars of the Convention, aimed at providing the institutional and regulatory framework to reduce the likelihood of corrupt practices. Responding to threats and trends in corruption, the Convention calls for the development of comprehensive preventive policies to ensure good governance, accountability and transparency. Independent anti-corruption bodies should be established to oversee and coordinate the implementation of anti-corruption policies, develop codes of conduct for public officials, promote transparency and accountability and raise awareness of the negative impact of corruption. The Convention also includes a set of criminalization provisions, which facilitate convergence in national priorities and action, while fostering international cooperation.

Corruption is a transnational phenomenon, affecting the political stability and socio-economic development of countries around the world. International cooperation is critical in order to successfully control and prevent this phenomenon, ranging from extradition, mutual legal assistance, transfer of sentenced persons and criminal proceedings, law enforcement cooperation, joint

investigations and coordination of investigative techniques. Asset recovery is given special attention in terms of international cooperation. The Convention elevates the return of assets as a “fundamental principle” and obliges States parties to ensure the widest possible mutual cooperation and assistance.

### Global Programme against Corruption

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) launched its Global Programme against Corruption in 1999. The Programme provides technical assistance to Member States and works to strengthen international cooperation with agencies dealing with anti-corruption policy, advocacy and enforcement. Judicial integrity and capacity-building projects are a special area of action.

To ensure the widest possible impact the Programme also: (a) disseminates best practices to prevent and control corruption; (b) develops a network of dedicated individuals in assisted Member States; (c) continues to work with the International Group for Anti-Corruption Coordination to enhance cooperation across organizations; (d) establishes closer links with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society and the private sector; and (e) builds the knowledge base on the impact, nature and trends in corrupt practices, as well as the most effective means for tackling them.

### For further information:

[www.unodc.org](http://www.unodc.org) and [www.unis.unvienna.org](http://www.unis.unvienna.org)