



Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index: Time for a Rethink

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Abstract

The Corruption Perceptions Index is the most cited indicator of corruption. NGOs, academics and the media often refer to it when discussing corruption in a specific country and making comparisons between countries. Although the index is a useful tool for anti-corruption campaigners, domestic policymakers and international agencies, it contains a number of flaws the most serious being that it is compiled using data on perceptions rather than actual corruption. We discuss these flaws and offer some proposals.

JEL Classification: E26, G38, H1, H57

Introduction

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is the most widely cited indicator of corruption. The CPI, which currently covers 180 countries, is published annually and is given prominence by journalists, anti-corruption campaigners, academics and

politicians. The CPI is often cited in discussions about the state of corruption in a particular country.

The CPI uses data sources drawn from a variety of different surveys, which concentrate primarily on businesspeople and country experts. What is often not emphasised in various media discussions is that the CPI measures **perceptions** rather than **actual** levels of corruption. The CPI, which is confined to corruption in the public sector, reports a specific score for each country calculated using the survey data. The scores are then used to rank countries. A score of 100 indicates that there is no corruption whereas a score of 0 indicates that there is a very high level of corruption.

Countries that have traditionally been considered as having low levels of corruption, tend to be used as benchmarks against which other countries are compared. Such countries include Denmark, Finland and Norway, which always rank in the top 10. But are comparisons using the CPI scores valid? It depends on which countries are being compared. Let us look at two countries with, historically, relatively good CPI rankings.

The UK

According to the 2023 edition of the CPI, the UK, with a score of 71, was ranked joint 20th with Austria, France and the Seychelles. Does this reflect the actual level of corruption in the UK when compared with lower ranking countries? For anyone who has followed closely developments in the UK over many years, one thing is certain: the UK is far more corrupt than the CPI would have us believe. Below are some examples:

- 1972-74: John Poulson fraud affair involving the Tory MP, Reginald Maudling, and others
- 1976-82: London Metropolitan Police corruption involving bribes from criminals
- 1985 : Al Yamamah affair involving BAE and defence contract bribes
- 1994 : Cash-for-questions affair involving the Tory MP Neil Hamilton, and others
- 1997 : Bernie Ecclestone affair involving a large donation to the Labour Party
- 1998 : Peter Mandelson, Labour Government minister, involving a £373.000 personal loan
- 2006 : David Mills, husband of Labour Government minister, involving a £340.000 loan
- 2006 : Cash-for-honours scandal involving the Prime Minister, Tony Blair
- 2009 : Cash-for-influence involving the Labour Party
- 2009 : UK parliamentary expenses scandal involving, mostly, the two main political parties
- 2010 : Scandal involving the expenses claims of Lib Democrat minister, David Laws
- 2012 : Cash-for-access scandal involving Tory MP, Peter Cruddas
- 2016-17: Alleged bribery of Prince Charles' Foundation by wealthy Saudi national
- 2019-22: Various unethical expenses involving Boris Johnson and Tory Party donors
- 2020-22: Covid related contracts awarded to politically connected companies
- 2021 : Greensill lobbying scandal involving former Prime Minister, David Cameron
- 2021 : Paid advocacy scandal involving the Tory MP, Owen Patterson.

The above list is far from exhaustive; it is merely representative. Two cases are worth considering in more detail since they are indicative of the dishonesty and impropriety that characterise public life in the UK.

THE PPE SCANDAL

During the Covid pandemic, the British government purchased billions of pounds worth of personal protection equipment (PPE). It transpired that a significant amount of this equipment was faulty or inappropriate for the needs of hospitals. Furthermore, much of it was purchased at inflated prices and from companies which had connections to the Conservative Party and/or had no previous experience in sourcing PPE products.

In April 2021, Transparency International published a report, *Track and Trace*, which reviewed nearly 1.000 Covid related contracts worth £18 billion. The report identified:

“....73 contracts worth more than £3.7 billion, equivalent to 20 percent of COVID-19 contracts between February and November 2020, that raise one or more red flags for possible corruption....Our analysis of the available evidence is consistent with there being systemic bias towards those with connections to the party of government in Westminster....”

The key findings were, quote:

- “Contracts awarded to companies with political connections: Twenty-four PPE contracts worth £1.6 billion were *awarded to those with known political connections to Conservative Party*. Three contracts worth £536 million went to politically connected companies for testing related services”. (my italics)
- “Contracts awarded without competition: Between February and November 2020, 98.9 percent of COVID-19 related contracts by value (£17.8 billion) were *awarded without any form of competition, many without adequate justification*”. (my italics)
- “Contracts awarded to companies with no track record of supplying goods or services: Fourteen companies incorporated in 2020 received contracts worth more than £620 million, of which 13 contracts totalling £255 million went to *10 firms that were less than 60 days old*”. (my italics)

Following the findings of parliament’s Public Accounts Committee, that £4 billion of unusable PPE was purchased in the first year of the pandemic, the Chair of the Committee, Meg Hillier, stated the following in June 2022:

“The story of PPE purchasing is perhaps the most shameful episode in the UK government response to the pandemic...the government splurged huge amounts of money, *paying obscenely inflated prices and payments to middlemen in a chaotic rush during which they chucked out even the most cursory due diligence. This has left us with massive public contracts now under investigation by the National Crime Agency or in dispute because of allegations of modern slavery in the supply chain*”. (my italics)

A later report by the National Audit Office covering the period 2020-2022, and published in January 2023, found that a total of £15 billion had been wasted on unusable, overpriced and undelivered PPE.

THE ROYAL DUCHY OF LANCASTER SCANDAL

McClenaghan et al. (2023) revealed in *The Guardian* that the Duchy of Lancaster, which belongs to the reigning monarch, had benefited from the financial assets of people who died intestate. Under an antiquated system, whose origins date back to feudal times, when a deceased person living in the Duchy is intestate their financial assets are collected by the Duchy and, after deducting for costs, the revenues are supposedly distributed to charities. However, the *Guardian* journalists examined the accounts of the Duchy and found that only 15% of these funds, known as *bona vacantia*, ended up with charities. Instead, the remaining 75% were used by the Duchy to repair buildings on its estate. The buildings included farmhouses, cottages, holiday homes, etc, all used by the Duchy for, essentially, commercial purposes.

The Duchy covers a large area comprising 44,748 acres of land in rural parts of Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Cheshire, Cumbria and other parts of Northwest England. The Duchy also owns a significant portfolio of properties in the Savoy area (off the Strand in London) as well as a portfolio of financial investments. McClenaghan et al. also revealed that over the 10-year period, 2013-2023, the Duchy received about £60 million in *bona vacantia*. And since inheriting the Duchy from the Queen, King Charles had, at the time of the *Guardian* article, already received £26 million in revenues from the Duchy, although it is not clear whether this includes the *bona vacantia*. Note that neither the Duchy of Lancaster nor the Duchy of Cornwall (owned by Prince William) pay capital gains tax or corporation tax.

Despite all the scandals mentioned above, and the myriad of other documented cases, the UK has consistently ranked in the top 20 of the least corrupt countries in the world. In fact, as recently as 2017, it ranked joint 8th with Canada, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Its 2022 ranking was joint 18th with Belgium and Japan.

Germany

The UK is not unique in being corrupt while at the same time registering a respectable CPI ranking. France and Germany are two other examples. Let's look at Germany, which in the 2023 CPI had a score of 78 and was ranked joint 9th with Luxembourg. The country has had numerous corruption scandals. In 1999 a scandal involving illegal CDU financing came to light, which would eventually bring down Helmut Kohl and his anointed successor, Wolfgang Schäuble. German investigators found that Kohl, Schäuble and other senior CDU figures, had accepted payments from an agent acting for Thyssen-Henschel, an arms manufacturer, to promote deals with Saudi Arabia and Canada. Although both Kohl and Schäuble resigned, Schäuble's career was later resurrected. The legal unravelling from the scandal continued until 2013.

A more recent example of malfeasance which, like the 1999 scandal, shook the German political establishment, was in March 2021 when five MPs from the conservative block of the Bundestag, had to resign or were suspended over actual or alleged corruption. These were as follows:

- CDU MP, Nicolas Lobal, resigned due to media reports that he made €250.000 from brokering procurement deals for face masks
- CSU MP, Georg Nuesslein, resigned over revelations that he made over €600.000 from negotiating the delivery of face masks from China
- CDU MP, Mark Hauptmann, resigned amid allegations that the newspaper he owned received cash-for-influence from Azerbaijan
- Two other CDU MPs, Karin Strenz and Axel Fischer, were suspended from the Bundestag over allegations that they received money to lobby on behalf of Azerbaijan.

And of course, let us not forget a certain Ursula von der Leyen, who, when she served as Germany's Minister of Defence between 2013 and 2019, became embroiled in a scandal regarding payments of €250 million to consultants related to arms contracts. The Federal Audit Office found that, of the €250 million declared, only €5.1 million had been spent. One of the consultants was McKinsey & Company, where von der Leyen's son worked. Furthermore, messages related to the contracts had been deleted from two of von der Leyen's mobile phones. Although she was eventually cleared of corruption allegations, questions over her probity during that period remain to this day. After she was appointed President of the EU Commission, she again became embroiled in controversy, this time regarding the procurement of the Covid vaccine from Pfizer. But that is another story.

Criticisms of the CPI

Problematic Perceptions

Several researchers have pointed out the drawbacks of using perceptions. For example, Cobham (2013) and Rohwer (2009) argue that perceptions are those of the elite rather than ordinary people, and the perceptions of business executives do not necessarily match those of small entrepreneurs (Rohwer, 2009). Heywood (2016) asserts that perceptions can be biased, and hence may not reflect reality. They may be influenced by the media (overplayed or underplayed) and, as Soreide (2006) points out, even country experts can be influenced by a biased media. Rower (2009) argues that perceptions can also reflect attitudes towards a particular political party, either positively or negatively. Soreide (2006) identifies a problem of what we might call a self-generating bias. Specifically, there is a likelihood that those being surveyed will be influenced by previous CPI scores and rankings. We would add that perceptions may be historically cultivated and culturally influenced.

Ideally, a more objective measure of corruption should be used, such as the number of court cases or the number of cases reported to the police. However, these present their own limitations, and are as problematic as perceptions. For example, not all cases of corruption are reported to, or investigated by the police. And as has been documented many times, the

police are themselves not averse to being corrupt. The judicial system may also be corrupt or subject to political interference.

With regard to the low-ranking countries, a major flaw with using perceptions is the lack of context. One could argue that it is unreasonable or even naïve to view corruption from the perspective of a stable and functioning liberal democracy. If we look at the 30 lowest ranking countries, many of these are either engaged in conflicts with other states, or are in a state of civil war, or are dealing with post-conflict economic and social disruption (often involving large numbers of internally displaced people). Some countries lack strong central government or have weak state institutions (police, judiciary, etc) due to chronic underfunding arising from economic underdevelopment. It is inevitable that, under such circumstances, corruption will be rife. Thus, even if the political will exists for tackling corruption, the economic, judicial and policing infrastructure may not be able to deliver.

Narrow Definition of Corruption

Corruption is defined by Transparency International as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”. Specifically, it is corruption in the public sector which takes the form of bribes to civil servants and politicians, the misuse of public funds, awarding contracts to the sponsors, friends or relatives of politicians, nepotism in the civil service, and other similar types of misconduct. This definition thus excludes, a) bribery in the private/corporate sector¹; b) tax evasion involving corrupt accountants and lawyers; c) money laundering; d) gerrymandering (sometimes legal but cynical); and e) political nepotism. Of course, public and private sector corruption are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, more often than not, they are mutually dependent.

A fundamental problem is that there is no universally acceptable definition of what constitutes corrupt activity. What is corrupt in one country is acceptable in another. A good example of this, is the financing of political parties in the USA. Wealthy and powerful individuals are allowed to provide finance to political parties or specific candidates without revealing their identity to the electorate. This “dark money”, which is estimated to exceed \$1 billion and increasing, influences the political agenda without accountability or transparency². In many other countries, such financing is considered a form of corruption and is thus prohibited. Another example is political or “partisan” gerrymandering, a practice that was first identified in Massachusetts in 1812. In 2019 the US Supreme Court declined to rule on whether the practice was illegal, instead referring the issue to state courts. Thus, in some states it is legal and in others it is not. Legal or not, it is a cynical ploy to gain favour for one political party or the other. Or as Dawkins (2014) headed his article in *The Guardian*, “In America, voters don’t pick their politicians. Politicians pick their voters”. Dawkins was referring to gerrymandering in general and racial gerrymandering in particular, which is

1 For example, bribes in the construction sector involving payments between the main contractor and the sub-contractors or bribes paid by a company in country X to a company in country Y.

2 Mayer(2018) provides an in-depth analysis of dark money and its corrosive impact on US democracy.

illegal. It is important to point out that gerrymandering is not confined to the US, but it is particularly prevalent there³.

Over-Precise Scores and Rankings

The CPI is calculated using data compiled from 13 surveys of 12 different sources. These include Bertelsmann, Freedom House, the World Bank, the Economist Intelligence Unit and the African Development Bank. The surveys seek to obtain the perceptions of business executives and country experts about corrupt behaviour in the public sector. As stated above, such behaviour refers to bribery, diversion of public funds, use of the public office for private gain, nepotism in the civil service and state capture.

The data, which are collected over a two-year period in order to provide smoothing, are standardised by subtracting the mean of each source in the baseline year from each country score and then dividing by the standard deviation of that source in the baseline year. The standardisation results in a data set centred around 0 with a standard deviation of 1. The scores are then transformed to fit the CPI scale of 0-100. Each score is provided with a standard error and 90% confidence interval⁴. But standardisation does not guarantee accuracy. For example, the smaller the number of sources in a country, the lower the accuracy of the confidence intervals. This is especially problematic in developing countries. But, more generally, there are issues related to selection bias and measurement errors.

Prior to 2012, the CPI scores were reported on a scale of 0-10 (0 being highly corrupt and 10 being very clean) and numbers were reported to one decimal place. Thus, for example, in the 2011 CPI, New Zealand, which ranked 1st, scored 9.5, and Afghanistan, which ranked 177th, scored 1.6. Such precision gave the impression of scientific accuracy and raised scepticism among researchers. Moreover, what does it mean if one country scores, say, 2.3 and another 2.4? Is there a qualitative difference? Despite measurement errors due to the nature of the data, such small differences in the scores were usually ignored by commentators and, instead, attention was focused on the rankings. In the light of such criticisms, in 2012 Transparency International replaced the 0-10 scale with 0-100 and ceased reporting scores to one decimal place. But the flaws we have described persist. Whether a country scores 1.8 or 18 it does not address the problem of over-precision.

Fixing the problems: some proposals

Despite its limitations, abandoning the CPI completely would remove some of its useful aspects or, as Hough (2017, 2020) puts it, it's like throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

3 A stark example of how gerrymandering distorts electoral outcomes is the 2022 parliamentary election in Hungary. See *The Economist* (2022).

4 See Transparency International (2023) for more details. Budsaratragoon (2020) provides an alternative and more complex methodology involving four stages: expectation maximization clustering, Bayesian network with a tree augmented naïve Bayes classifier, partial least squares structural equation modelling and importance-performance map analysis. You get the picture.

It is important to reiterate that there is no single, objective measure of a disparate group of corrupt activities observed across the globe. In that regard, the CPI plays some useful role for both policymakers and anti-corruption activists by providing an indicative picture. Thus, we propose four changes involving: 1) contextual analysis; 2) an improved CPI; 3) incorporation of an expanded *Global Corruption Barometer*; and 4) compilation of data on actual cases of corruption.

1) Contextual analysis

Heywood (2016) makes a very important, but largely neglected, point that corruption is contextual. Corruption doesn't happen in a vacuum. The socio-economic and political context needs to be taken into account. For example, we referred above to inter and intra-state conflict as well as a lack of resources due to a country's underdevelopment as reasons why corruption exists and why it may not be a priority.

We have also mentioned types of corruption that have strong local characteristics, such as cash-for-honours in the UK. In the latter case, the honours system has its origins in feudal England which evolved in the 20th century into what we are familiar with today, e.g. MBE, OBE, CBE, DBE/KBE (Damehood/Knighthood). And, of course, the most abused honours are the life peerages in the House of Lords, bestowed by sitting prime ministers or those who are leaving. The bestowing of honours is not unique to the UK, nor is it unethical, but the scale of the tawdriness and, often, outright corruption associated with the UK honours system, sets it apart from many other countries⁵.

As an illustration of contextual analysis, an assessment of corruption in some small island states would require an examination of the power and social dynamics emanating from clientelism, extensive family networks and the difficulty in concealing wealth, which are all intertwined. Add to the mix the limited opportunities for career advancement, barriers to entry for new enterprises in existing markets and the, sometimes, high premium attached to social status—signalled through conspicuous consumption—and an understanding begins to emerge about why corruption in small states, even those that are economically developed, can be prevalent.

Cyprus is a classic example of these characteristics, reinforced by a political class that is driven by self-enrichment and nepotism, state capture and a ponderous judicial system which is not fit for purpose.

2) Improving the CPI

This can be achieved by:

⁵ For examples of how the honours system has been abused, see Thevoz (2021) and *The Week* (2022).

a) Broadening the definition of corruption

More emphasis needs to be put on political corruption. Hence, state capture should include political capture whereby the independence of institutions, such as the central bank, can be seriously undermined by appointing politically connected individuals to the executive board. The goal of these individuals is to pursue the agenda of the governing party, rather than the agenda of the institution. Political nepotism is another form of corruption. We have already mentioned gerrymandering and the financing of political parties using 'dark money'. We can also include some forms of voter disenfranchisement, especially those using racial or gender criteria, whose main purpose is to prevent a particular electoral outcome. Moreover, the exclusion of private /corporate sector corruption, which is perhaps the major flaw in the Transparency International definition, needs to be addressed. Any broadening of the definition should thus include money laundering, tax evasion and private sector bribery.

b) Using a more representative panel of experts

The country experts whose perceptions are surveyed, tend to be drawn from mainstream organisations, often based outside the countries they are assessing, and hence they merely regurgitate biased views. A wider pool of experts that includes not just mainstream economists but also NGOs, journalists and academics (sociologists, political analysts) both from inside and outside each country should, ideally, be included. Domestically based experts tend to have a greater awareness of developments than outsiders. We acknowledge that a broader based panel might not always be feasible, and it would certainly be costly.

3) Incorporate data from the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB)

The GCB is, paradoxically given the flaws of the CPI, produced by Transparency International. It was launched in 2003, and it sets out to obtain an indication of public sector corruption by asking ordinary people to divulge if they have experienced corruption themselves, especially with regard to the need to pay bribes for public services. Those surveyed are also asked to express an opinion about the state of corruption in their country, whether it has improved or worsened, and whether they consider their government to be corrupt. Interviews are either conducted over the phone or face-to-face. The sample size varies from country to country. For example, 500 individuals are surveyed in Malta and over 4.000 in China. These are small sample sizes, but useful, nonetheless. The data is weighted but the methodology is simpler and more straightforward than that used for the CPI. For some countries, for example Cyprus, which is covered in the EU section of the report, the GCB presents a picture of corruption that is more serious than indicated by the CPI.

The GCB is by no means perfect. The regional reports do not cover the same periods, post-Brexit UK has not been included and detailed coverage of the USA was only covered in one edition. The explanation for the USA's absence from the GCB is that it is due to funding constraints⁶, though one might legitimately ask why funding is available for some countries

⁶ See Transparency International (2017), page 12, note IX.

and not for others. There is also the issue of citizens sometimes underestimating the extent of corruption in their own country.

4) Compile data on actual cases of corruption

There are a variety of sources that can be used to document actual corruption, e.g. newspaper articles, court cases, reports by domestic and international anti-corruption agencies, national audit offices and investigative journalists. As with some of the other proposals above, this may be constrained by the availability of financial resources. However, once a database is set up the updating of the information becomes relatively easier. The advantage of such a database is that it would provide time series data enabling researchers and other interested parties to monitor corruption over selected periods. The caveats mentioned above regarding court cases, the media, etc. apply, but looking at actual cases of corruption is just one facet of a heterogeneous approach aimed at reducing reliance on perceptions.

Words Can Speak Louder Than Numbers

The above changes would allow the results to be presented in an alternative manner. Soreide (2006) makes an interesting proposal. Rather than assign precise values to each country, the calculated CPI values would be rounded to the nearest whole number and countries would be grouped under numbers from 0 to 10. The advantage of this is that: a) it overcomes the uncertainty imbedded in the data and calculations, and b) it removes the controversy which can emanate when comparing countries. In the specific example she gives using the 2004 rankings, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and New Zealand would be presented as one grouping with a score of 10, Australia, Canada, Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK would be the next grouping with a score of 9, and so on. When Soreide proposed this, the CPI was still using the scale of 0-10. The same presentation could be made using the post-2011 scale of 0-100.

Soreide's proposal is certainly an improvement on how the CPI is currently presented. But is it sufficient? Her proposal still relies on presenting a scoring system, albeit allocated to a group of countries rather than to individual states. Furthermore, the grouping of countries with a score of 10 (or 100 using the post-2011 scale) implies that they are free of corruption, a highly unlikely phenomenon. We thus propose a more radical presentation. Rather than reporting specific scores and rankings, we propose using five general categories whose nomenclature is direct and to the point: Least Corrupt, Partly Corrupt, Corrupt, Very Corrupt and Most Corrupt. These descriptions are based on the reasonable premise that no country is completely clean, hence the use of the term Least Corrupt as the starting point.

The advantage of using categories is that it reduces the pretence of scientific precision associated with numerical scores and rankings, especially when comparisons with other countries are being made. It also limits the opportunity for politicians to put a positive spin on unfavourable numbers, particularly when a country's ranking changes. It is one thing to say that, since country X has a score of 70 and is ranked, say, 19th, it is in the top 20 least

corrupt countries, and quite another to say that it has been designated as “partly corrupt” or even “corrupt”.

On the basis of existing evidence, the rankings for some of the countries using the current CPI do not reflect the actual level of corruption. Table 1 below lists the classification of a sample of countries based on recent levels of corruption rather than purely on perceptions. The sample classifications take into account a broader definition of corruption:

Table 1—Examples of countries based on recent corruption

Least Corrupt	Denmark, Finland, Norway
Partly Corrupt	Australia, Canada, Sweden
Corrupt	France, Germany, Japan, S. Korea, UK, USA
Very Corrupt	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Malta, Romania
Most Corrupt	Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Ukraine(pre-war)

There is a case to be made for some countries classified as Corrupt to be considered Very Corrupt. France and the UK would be obvious examples.

Conclusion

Measuring corruption in the form of a precise index, such as the CPI, is problematic, especially when the index measures perceptions rather than actual corruption. Rather than abandoning the CPI completely, an alternative is to utilise an improved CPI as described above. This might yield more meaningful results which are less prone to controversy. In addition to this, the inclusion of contextual analysis, data from the GCB and documented cases of actual corruption would certainly provide a more accurate assessment than that provided by the current CPI.

Corruption is a worldwide phenomenon that is unlikely to be eradicated soon. Anti-corruption campaigners need to focus on those types of corruption that are the most insidious and corrosive to democracy and the welfare of ordinary people. In some developing countries, petty bribery can have a disproportionate impact on the poor whereas in the developed world, large scale tax evasion can impact on the fiscal budgets of governments. And political corruption is a scourge wherever it occurs.

Furthermore, one has to question what is to be gained in terms of policy initiatives, by including war-torn countries or states that are ungovernable in any assessment of corruption. It would be remarkable if countries such as the DRC, Haiti, Libya, Somalia, and many others, were not afflicted by corruption. In these cases, Transparency International would be better advised to campaign for conflict resolution, economic reconstruction and the strengthening of institutions.

Finally, some western governments and media might wish to exercise some humility and self-scrutiny before lecturing other countries.

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