

The Role of Universities in the Fight against Corruption

Introduction

The recent increase in the number of reports on anti-graft activities in the various sectors of Kenyan society reveals a greater determination on the part of the government and of international and local bodies to curb corruption in the country. After taking power in December 2002, the NARC government under the leadership of President Kibaki carried out a series of legal and institutional reforms among which was the enactment of the Anti-Corruption and Economic Crimes Act of 2003 through which the Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission was established.

However in spite of these efforts, ratings from Transparency International continued to show Kenya as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. In its 2006 Corruptions Perceptions Index Kenya was ranked 142nd out of 163 countries, with a score of 2.2 – based on a scale from zero to ten- indicating high levels of perceived corruption in the country. Transparency International Kenyan Chapter also conducted a survey in the same year which showed that corruption cases increased in 2005 and that bribery continues to form part of the Kenyans' way of life.

In 2006 the Kenya Anti Corruption Commission published its first National Corruption Perception Survey with the aim of educating the public about the nature, levels and extent of corruption and where it occurs. It also launched the Kenya National Anti-Corruption Plan which contains the national strategy to fight corruption. Its main objective is to seek the collaboration of the various stakeholders to progressively and systematically reduce, to the extent possible, the causes and destructive effects of corruption in Kenya.¹ The Plan proposes a number of measures to fight corruption, namely, the creation of enabling environments, the building and strengthening of institutions, the establishment and adoption of ethical standards in Kenyan organizations, and the creation of public awareness on the evils of corruption. Insofar as education is concerned, it specifically proposed the inclusion of an anti-corruption module in the curricula of all training and educational institutions. The aim of this paper is to examine the role of educational institutions, in particular the universities, in the fight against corruption.

The identity of the university

The university as an institution of higher learning plays an important role in shaping the values of a society. The leaders of a country are a product of the educational system in which they grew up and were nurtured. The character and personalities of the leaders, their minds and wills, have been molded to a great extent by the universities in which they received their education. The phenomenon of corruption thrives in a society where people readily forego what is true and good in exchange for what is of profit or of use to them. In such a society, ideals do not exist. For its people values like truth, justice and honor do not have any meaning when they are faced with the possibility of personal gain.

¹ Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission (2006)

There is therefore a need for universities that can provide graduates who are capable of transcending the utilitarian mind-set and of serving the common good.

In order to fulfill its role in society the university should be true to its identity and mission. According to John Henry Newman, a university is a place where men are educated and not merely instructed. Instruction is the transmission of functional or technical knowledge; one is instructed for instance in the useful arts, in trades and in business. For Newman university education has a wider scope. Its aim is the communication of what he called “liberal” knowledge which he defined using terms such as “knowledge that is sufficient for itself”, or “knowledge capable of being its own end”. He qualified it further by stating that knowledge is especially liberal when and so far as it is philosophical.² These ideas of Newman were also stated in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. In *Book I, Chapter 2* philosophy is described as a type of knowledge or science that is pursued for its own sake, and not for any utilitarian end.³ Starting from the premise that all men desire to know, and that philosophy or wisdom is a form of knowledge that enables us to know the ultimate explanation and meaning of reality, philosophy then can be called in the strict sense a free science –or in Newman’s term “liberal” -because it is the knowledge that fully satisfies man’s aspiration for truth. Philosophical activity is a free endeavor because it is sought for the sake of man himself: to satisfy his yearning for truth and consequently to lead him to freedom. It is within this context that philosophy can be distinguished from other forms of knowledge that are pursued for some immediate use or application: for example people study medicine to save human lives or pursue business studies to run the economy. Philosophy on the other hand is in the strict sense pursued for its sake. Its purpose is the contemplation of truth, and unfortunately it is for this reason that it is considered as a form of knowledge that is of no utility to society. Newman’s theory however suggests a completely different view: for him philosophical studies are an important component of university education. In my opinion, Newman’s idea of a university can provide us a source of valuable insights to understand the role of the universities in the fight against corruption.

The university’s contribution in the fight against corruption

The recommendation of the National Anti-Corruption Plan to actively involve educational institutions in the fight against corruption is laudable. I argue however that the introduction of anti-corruption modules in the curricula of educational institutions as envisaged by the Plan is not enough to achieve its objectives. While recognizing the positive results achieved so far by these programs, it is also important to highlight that these are mainly centered on providing *technical* skills to fight corruption. For instance participants are taught how to prosecute, detect and investigate corrupt cases; how to seize, freeze and confiscate the proceeds of corruption; how to recover assets, etc. In this sense, corruption is conceptualized as a technical problem that can be addressed by providing people certain skills to fight it. The main objection against this approach however is that it does not take into account the fact that corruption is primarily a moral or ethical problem; corrupt practices are carried out by individuals who act on the basis of

² Newman, *The Idea of a University*, V, 5.

³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982^b25.

morally wrong principles. It is therefore necessary to put emphasis on the need for moral convictions and not just techniques in the fight against corruption. Convictions however are not transmitted through instruction but education. Experience indicates that in order to forge strong moral convictions, it is necessary to count on time and reflection which the university setting opportunely provides.

Courses in philosophy offered at the university level can be a powerful means in shaping the minds of young people to aspire for a more just society. Pieper describes philosophy as the reflection on the totality of reality which we encounter in view of their ultimate reasons: to engage in philosophy means to ask questions, to reflect on questions and ultimately to face one single question regarding the world as a totality: “What is it all about?”⁴ Philosophy classes can be an opportunity for students to deeply reflect on issues affecting their society and to look for the most adequate solutions to resolve them. In the case of corruption it is my opinion that philosophy classes are necessary for students to understand the theoretical foundations of justice; it is not possible to formulate effective strategies to fight corruption without having addressed certain fundamental questions such as “What is justice?”, “What does it mean to be just”, or “Why is justice an ethical duty?”

Education in justice

Among the various philosophical disciplines that can be offered in the universities, moral philosophy applied in economic activity or business ethics can help to educate students in justice. Justice is defined as the virtue whereby man renders to each one what is his due. What is implicit in this definition is that every human person possesses a set of rights that are due to him and which his fellow men are obliged to uphold and respect as something inviolable. In this sense the justification of the existence of such rights becomes as necessary as that of justice itself.⁵ The commitment to be just, ‘to give what is due to another’, rests on the conviction that all men are fundamentally equal and that each person has rights that are his by virtue of that fundamental equality. Students need to understand that corruption is an injustice; it is indicative of a society in which the basic rights of people are constantly violated. It would be enough to consider the unjust consequences of corrupt activities: for example by using public funds for their personal interests corrupt officials deny their fellow citizens the possibility of having access to a decent living, to education and other basic needs that constitute the fundamental rights of every human being.

The university can also reinforce the students’ understanding of justice in its theoretical foundations by organizing programs that foster solidarity with the less fortunate members of their society. These activities are useful because they serve as an eye-opener for the students to the harsh living conditions that their fellow citizens go through. Through these programs they acquire moral experience that can serve as the basis for reflection, and could help them to understand the seriousness of injustice as an offense against human dignity. These experiences can also stimulate students to become agents of change in

⁴ Pieper (1992), p 12-19.

⁵ Pieper (1966), p. 44.

their communities and to actively participate in seeking solutions to problems that arise from the unjust economic inequalities in their country. For example, Strathmore University a private university in Kenya has been complementing its ethics programs with community projects that enable its students to be in contact with the disadvantaged members of society. Under this project students are placed to work in an institution for at least 150 hours of service, after which they are required to submit a written report. Volunteers' work include teaching in schools, assisting in a home for abandoned or street children, teaching in a primary or a non-formal school, and providing business and computer skills to unemployed youth living in informal settlements. Testimonies from participants have shown that these programs have had a positive impact on the life of many students. For instance, one of the students who worked in a centre for Street Boys wrote:

“Working at the Centre has been for me very fulfilling and educative. It has taught me a lot of things about myself and helped me build up some aspects of my character, such as patience and compassion for others. It has also given me the opportunity to understand the hardships the less fortunate members of society go through and why we need to do much more to help those less fortunate by giving not only our resources but our time too.”

This testimony among many others indicates that practical experience is important to awaken young people's consciousness to the fact that corruption is an injustice that needs to be fought because it primarily offends human dignity. Corrupt practices lead to unjust social inequalities that deprive the weaker members of society of the chance to live truly human lives. The fight against corruption entails not only a personal commitment to practice integrity in one's professional life but also a commitment to promote a lifestyle that is in accord with social justice. The universities through its philosophy and ethics programs should play a leading role in transmitting these fundamental ideas and values to its students who will be the future leaders of their country.

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