



**FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGING
CITIZENS IN ANTI-CORRUPTION
MECHANISMS**

Transparency International is a global movement with one vision: a world in which government, business, civil society and the daily lives of people are free of corruption. Through more than 100 chapters worldwide and an international secretariat in Berlin, we are leading the fight against corruption to turn this vision into reality.

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This guide is based on *From Grievance to Engagement – How People Decide to Act Against Corruption* by Global Integrity

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INTRODUCTION

Are you an anti-corruption civil society advocate? A government official willing to fight corruption? A donor funding anti-corruption initiatives? Are you concerned about fighting corruption effectively, including by mobilising the people most affected? Are you looking for ways to generate action and encourage citizens to make better use of existing anti-corruption mechanisms?

In this guide, we build on our collective understanding that citizen engagement matters in the fight against corruption and provide insights about how organisations might go about designing more effective, sustainable and engaging anti-corruption mechanisms. Based on research into why and how people decide to report corruption and what sustains initial engagement, we offer five principles that inform how organisations can understand, analyse and possibly adapt their anti-corruption mechanisms to become more effective.

These principles can guide practical steps to create and adapt anti-corruption mechanisms to ensure their usefulness in addressing grievances experienced by citizens. The principles are applicable across countries and contexts and are relevant for fostering engagement across different types of corruption problems.

We do not pretend, however, to offer a ready-made solution. The key to making anti-corruption mechanisms more effective is an organisation's willingness to continuously learn from the people it serves. Organisations should try to experiment and to adapt in ways that respond to what citizens need in a specific anti-corruption context and what is achievable within a particular environment.

This guide is based on a paper prepared for Transparency International by Global Integrity, [From Grievance to Engagement – How People Decide to Act Against Corruption](#). It explores how and why citizens decide to take action against corruption and presents a theory of change and practical guidance to support organisations in exploring how to engage people more successfully in their specific contexts. The paper is informed by field work done in collaboration with Transparency International Georgia and I-Watch Tunisia.

One prominent example of anti-corruption mechanisms is Transparency International's [Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres](#) (ALACs), which provide free and confidential legal advice to witnesses and victims of corruption, including whistleblowers. Offering a relevant, safe, credible and responsive mechanism for citizens to pursue their corruption-related complaints, ALACs empower citizens in the fight against corruption. The centres also play a critical role in identifying corruption hotspots that demand reform or official action. There are more than 100 ALACs run by Transparency International chapters in more than 60 countries around the world. Other anti-corruption mechanisms include [anti-corruption agencies](#), [ombudsmen](#) and complaint channels such as [helplines and hotlines](#).

THREE REASONS WHY CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

In recent years, governments, activists and civil society organisations alike have invested heavily in getting citizens involved in the fight against corruption. Each of these actors tries in various ways to help citizens identify, denounce and take action to root out corruption. In addition to carrying out more traditional information and awareness-raising campaigns, anti-corruption campaigners have set up social accountability mechanisms, created whistleblowing opportunities, designed grievance redress mechanisms, provided legal aid and supported the emergence of social movements.

There are three key reasons to focus on such efforts:

- Engaging citizens helps to **build and strengthen the movement** needed to effectively shift power in favour of citizens and organisations working to stop corruption.
- Working with citizens helps organisations **understand the problems** people are confronted with, and how they perceive and prioritise what is most important to them.
- Engaging with citizens is key to reinforcing the fact that **participation matters** and that citizens can, and should, play a role in shaping the political systems in which they live, including by fighting for equity and justice.

However, there is mixed evidence about whether organisations working on integrity and anti-corruption do an effective job at actually involving citizens. If such organisations want to get better at involving citizens in anti-corruption efforts and eventually at developing and applying anti-corruption strategies that have an impact at scale, progress must be made on two fronts. Better understanding is needed of the factors and the logic that guide decision-making by citizens. There is also a need to develop better practical guidance to help organisations explore how to engage citizens in ways that best fit the particular contexts in which they live.

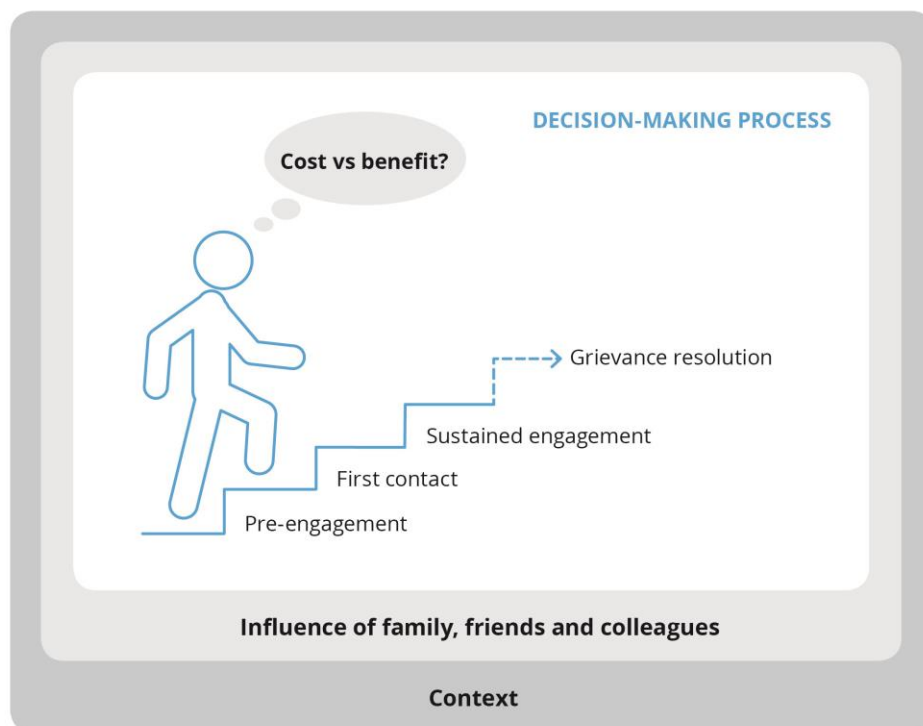
The following section briefly explores citizens' decision making, while the last section, "Five principles to encourage greater citizen engagement", spells out how organisations might go about reflecting on their own objectives in order to tailor citizen engagement mechanisms in ways that are most effective.

HOW CITIZENS DECIDE WHETHER TO ENGAGE

The decision regarding whether to engage and act against corruption lies ultimately in the hands of citizens. But what are the factors and the logic that guide people’s decision-making?

Existing guidance about how to set up citizen engagement mechanisms often assumes that the logic of such mechanisms can (or should) be replicated wholesale across different contexts. Yet there is evidence that context matters and that citizens have different interests and priorities in different localities. To design more effective anti-corruption mechanisms, it is important to understand the logic of how people decide to engage.

Citizens take action based on their own subjective analysis of what is “viable” in their particular context, given their preferences and beliefs. These preferences and beliefs are shaped by a number of factors.



The above graphic captures the factors that affect individual decision-making. It also lays out the sequence in which individuals process information and evaluate and re-evaluate whether to use a particular mechanism to take action against corruption.

PEOPLE'S PERSONAL COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

The decision whether to act against corruption lies in the hands of individuals who choose to engage against corruption only when the perceived benefit of doing so exceeds the perceived cost. For example, if an individual has been unjustly fired, demoted or denied the right to their land, they are likely to act if they believe the cost of enduring the grievance is higher than the risk of taking action.

However, people often do not have enough information to make a clear assessment. Their cost-benefit calculation is informed by a number of factors that are continuously assessed as the individual encounters and then starts to use a particular anti-corruption mechanism. Factors that influence whether individuals engage include the perceived relevance, credibility, safety, accessibility and responsiveness of the mechanism.

An additional factor in the perception of whether a mechanism is deemed viable is whether people experience success – even just small wins – throughout the engagement process. For example, hearing back from a ministry based on a right-to-information request can significantly bolster an individual's belief that a mechanism is worth pursuing, despite the fact that the response does not yet solve the corruption grievance at hand.

People continuously assess and reassess whether the cost of participating in a mechanism outweighs its cost. This, in turn, determines whether they stay engaged. A key influence in evaluating the cost, especially in terms of whether the context is deemed risky, is exerted by those close to the individual who makes an engagement decision. Family, friends, peers, colleagues and other individuals within important social circles translate what might be dubbed “context” into experiences, facts and stories that a person can assess.

The cost-benefit analysis with regard to a particular anti-corruption mechanism can, of course, change over time. It is therefore important to understand whether and at what point people start to consider an anti-corruption mechanism to be too costly – or ineffective – given their assessment.

THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

When people decide whether to engage with any given mechanism, they go through three phases: pre-engagement, first contact and sustained engagement.

The **pre-engagement phase** starts when an individual experiences a corruption-related grievance. At that point, they start assessing the costs the grievance will entail. They also consider all the available options for countering their grievance, including approaching the police, state accountability bodies, press or civil society programmes, and any anti-corruption mechanism they are aware of. They will also search for more information.

The **first contact phase** starts when an individual believes that contacting an anti-corruption mechanism is worth their time and energy and that they can mitigate the perceived risks. In some cases, the first-contact phase can last a month and will consist of people learning about a mechanism or researching it. In other cases, this phase may be as short as one meeting or a phone call with a volunteer or professional who runs the anti-corruption mechanism. In some cases, the engagement ends at this very moment, as people realise that the mechanism does not meet their expectations in terms of accessibility, safety, relevance, credibility and responsiveness. For

example, in Tunisia, people have repeatedly approached I-Watch trying to blow the whistle on misconduct witnessed in their workplace. Each time, I-Watch insists that they need documentation to pursue their case, as there is otherwise no basis on which to proceed. In some cases, people decide against blowing the whistle because they fear they could be identified if they submitted written documentation. In others, people submit written evidence and I-Watch is able to pursue a particular grievance.

The **sustained engagement phase** starts when people decide to work with an anti-corruption mechanism and try to counter their grievance. Actions in this phase include, among others, taking concrete steps to launch an investigation and regularly meeting with fellow campaigners to coordinate efforts. As “getting to know each other” turns into “working together towards a solution”, people expect to see things moving in the right direction.

RELEVANCE AND WHAT IT MEANS IN PRACTICE

Understanding how people decide to take action against corruption is essential in order to understand how organisations offering and promoting anti-corruption mechanisms can most effectively engage citizens and win them over to engage in the fight against corruption.

It pays great dividends to explore what a group of affected beneficiaries or stakeholders understands to be “viable” for them so that adjustments can be made to mechanism engagement strategies. A general rule is that it pays to consider how an anti-corruption mechanism might lower the perceived cost of engaging with it.

If the aim is to generate anti-corruption impact by broadening citizen engagement, there is value in identifying and testing how organisations can design and structure different steps in the citizen-engagement process most effectively to offer concrete solutions that address peoples’ needs. Focusing anti-corruption work around the five principles summarised below will help to significantly enhance the chances of sustainably engaging individuals through the mechanisms offered.

FIVE PRINCIPLES TO ENCOURAGE GREATER CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Instead of promising that a certain mechanism or model might work in every context – which we find highly unrealistic – we are offering five principles that we believe hold true in all contexts. These principles are meant to help you explore and reflect on how you might design or adapt your anti-corruption mechanisms to effectively engage with citizens. In addition, we encourage you to try Global Integrity’s [self-reflection tool](#), which comprises a number of questions to analyse your efforts and identify potential ways to strengthen existing mechanisms.

1. MAKE YOUR MECHANISM RELEVANT

People need to believe that an anti-corruption mechanism can help them solve a problem they care about. To manage expectations, be clear about what your mechanism can and cannot do. While favourable media coverage, as found in both Tunisia and Georgia, can get people to see a mechanism as relevant, the key point is whether you are actually addressing a pressing societal need as experienced by those individuals attempting to engage. **Think through the problems people experience and double-check whether the mechanism you offer is best suited to addressing their needs.**

Procedural successes, such as small wins along the journey to obtain justice, can signal a mechanism’s relevance and extend people’s patience to engage over time. In Tunisia, the ALAC files right to information (RTI) requests to move individual grievances forward and nurture engagement. Filing RTI requests and receiving information, or alternatively taking RTI requests not answered by the authorities through the court system, encourages citizens to continue engaging.

In Georgia, small wins inside and outside the courts are sufficient to keep people engaged and hopeful about finding a resolution to grievances. Wins inside the court system have contributed to people believing in the capability of ALAC lawyers and the justice system to make progress on their case. Speaking (or hearing allies speak) on television gave some whistleblowers a better feeling about their safety, and talking about their injustices gave them a sense of relief. Not all whistleblowers want to go on national television, however. Identifying the right level of engagement, even for different people participating within the same programme, is key to making and keeping mechanisms relevant.

2. MAKE YOUR MECHANISM SAFE

People will not act against corruption if they think the mechanism will put them at risk. Consider the risks people might face and work to mitigate them in advance. If you wait to think about and discuss risks until people approach you, you will have lost a number of people who have already decided against contacting you because of the risk. **Think about legal, physical, digital and social risks, and communicate how you might mitigate them.**

In Tunisia, fear about engaging in anti-corruption activities can be significant, but even that does not prevent engagement. One I-Watch volunteer explained: “My father was scared of potential threats: ‘You are going to be killed,’ he said. ‘The threat is real.’ I did it anyway.” In Georgia, safety is a concern but is less significant. People are worried about being identified as “snitches” by others in their community, and there is fear of social retaliation and diminished career opportunities. Unless you think about these risks and work towards clearly mitigating them, people might hesitate to engage with your mechanism.

3. MAKE YOUR MECHANISM CREDIBLE

Identifying the factors that make a mechanism credible is not a straightforward task. Much depends on what people perceive to be credible. Technical mechanisms can be – in certain situations – more trustworthy and therefore credible than non-technical mechanisms. In other cases, technical solutions have no credibility and it is important for people to know that the organisation can navigate the political and media landscape. **Cultural and contextual factors play an enormously important role, and ways to enhance and maintain credibility are best explored and decided at the local level.**

A key factor to help make mechanisms credible is to work with staff who genuinely care about users’ grievances and show that they care. ALAC lawyers in Batumi, Georgia, for example, said that actively listening to people’s stories – even to parts not relevant to the case – as well as being available for follow-ups and clarification questions makes people feel more comfortable, increasing the perceived credibility of the mechanism.

Staff at the ALAC in Tunisia explained how they looked out for signs that people were mistaking their youthfulness for lack of expertise and immediately responded by adapting their tone and style of communication to be more “lawyer-like”. In addition, ALAC Tunisia and the state anti-corruption agency often make referrals to one another based on their respective strengths, lending legitimacy to the other mechanism and enhancing the chances of being perceived as credible.

Group identity makes a significant difference for people who want to pursue collective grievances. People in Tunisia and Georgia acknowledged that they felt a sense of belonging and trust as soon as they made personal contact with the people running the mechanisms. Volunteers working for the mechanisms give up time and money to contribute to collective-action cases. In Georgia, for example, after taking on a property rights case, the Batumi ALAC staff visited the affected community to talk to all the aggrieved people – a gesture the community greatly appreciated.

A key concern around credibility is whether a state – or non-state – body is funded locally or supported by a foreign entity. For some people in Tunisia, foreign-funded mechanisms are preferable to locally financed mechanisms, as they are perceived to be independent. In Georgia, it is the other way round and people perceive state institutions as more credible than non-governmental ones.

4. MAKE YOUR MECHANISM RESPONSIVE

Timely communication and clear expectation management contribute greatly to people perceiving mechanisms as responsive. This is true for all phases of engagement, including the first contact and sustained engagement phases. Communicating truthfully about what the next steps will look like and why they are important is a core task of staff running anti-corruption mechanisms. It appears that individuals generally assess the timeliness of expected results to be rather disappointing. However, the way in which mechanism providers communicate this information and the quality of the

relationship they have with mechanism users can make up for “bad” news about the timeline. People in Tunisia appreciated direct updates by the ALAC more than the formal and procedural notices by Tunisia’s anti-corruption agency. **Consider all the ways in which you might regularly keep in touch with mechanism users and let them know about progress (or difficulties) in a timely fashion.**

5. MAKE YOUR MECHANISM ACCESSIBLE

To access an anti-corruption mechanism, people need first to become aware of it. They must then be convinced that they can access, understand and use the mechanism. Make your mechanisms recognisable, reachable and understandable to people with different literacy levels and across different types of media – whether online or offline. **To do so effectively, think through how, where and in what form you are able to best reach the audience you intend to target.**

In Tunisia, some people had to overcome multiple barriers to learn about mechanisms not immediately accessible to them, including travelling long distances, finding time during work hours to learn about mechanisms or recruiting friends to overcome challenges associated with their physical disabilities. Some mechanism providers take active measures to address accessibility barriers. The ALAC in Batumi, Georgia, runs mobile clinics, for example, which significantly improve accessibility to people outside the city.

CONCLUSION

Whether or not people access anti-corruption mechanisms depends to a large degree on whether they believe the benefits outweigh the perceived costs. The decision to engage is highly subjective, and whether or not a mechanism is “viable” is determined by its potential users.

From an organisational perspective, it is important to remember that the effectiveness with which the mechanism is used by citizens can be increased, ensuring that it is accessible, safe, relevant, credible and responsive. What any of these features looks like for a particular mechanism in a specific context at a certain point in time cannot be determined upfront. Instead, it is important that those offering the mechanisms take the time to scrutinise whether they meet the citizens’ needs and how they might be able to improve such mechanisms to be as effective as possible.

To further support your thinking about how to analyse mechanisms offered, Global Integrity has compiled a [self-assessment tool](#). This will help you consider some of the aspects important in any mechanism that tries to engage citizens in the fight against corruption. The list of questions is meant to kick-start the continued exploration of a mechanism’s features, inviting reflection without requiring a time-consuming or formalistic approach.

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