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SYNOPSIS

Fighting Corruption to Save the Environment: Cameroon's Experience

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The despair of losing battle against corruption in sub-Saharan Africa has recently made the headline of the International Herald Tribune (Dugger 2009). Such interest in the fight against corruption in tropical developing countries is based on the following socio-economic rationale: a reduction in accountability and transparency will enhance poverty and hinder economic and social developments in these poor countries (Kaufmann 1997). However, what lesser known is that corruption has also a negative impact on both a country's environmental protection and conservation efforts.

A global index which measured the countries' environmental performance (EPI) showed that the more corrupt a country is perceived to be, the poorer its environmental performance (Esty et al. 2008). The index uses 25 indicators such as water stress, conservation risk, forestry growing stock, intensive cropland and greenhouse gasses emissions per capita. It also takes into account the environmental burden of disease, sanitation and health ozone (Esty et al. 2008). Derived from the recently released report by Transparency International (2008), the average corruption perceptions index (CPI) of a tropical developing country is 2.9 ($n = 66$ countries) whilst the least corrupt countries of the world scored above 9.0. Unfortunately, tropical developing countries, by a stroke of fate, also harbour a major proportion of the world's biodiversity (Smith et al. 2003; Laurance 2004).

However, the nexus between environmental protection and corruption is still to be comprehensively proven (Ferraro 2005; Katzner 2005; Smith and Walpole 2005; Barrett et al. 2006). The least corrupt on a global comparison scale—usually so-called "First World" countries—may have a better environmental performance simply because environmental conservation is considered a priority as most of life's other concerns are being addressed. Since this is unlikely to be the case amongst poorer states, a more meaningful yardstick will be to compare the relationship between environmental performance and corruption only amongst developing countries in the tropics.

We re-analysed the available data, using 66 tropical developing countries, to determine if the relationship between CPI and EPI still holds using Pearson correlation (r). Interestingly, evidence of the correlation remains highly significant between the two indices amongst such relatively poor countries ($n = 66$, $r = 0.446$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 1a). Some studies create indices on the basis of perceived corruption levels within governments alone. However, Transparency International's CPI is derived from 14 sources, which evaluate corruption levels in both government and private sector. This broader sample eliminates problems associated with a narrow focus of corruption indicators (Transparency International 2008).

Poverty is often cited as a social-economic factor that constrains conservation efforts in the tropics (Peh 2008). It is, therefore, not surprising that we found a highly significant relationship between EPI and gross domestic product per capita corrected for purchasing power parity (GDP-PPP) (2009) amongst 63 developing countries ($n = 63$, $r = 0.632$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 1b). Given the complex nature of corruption, eradication of poverty alone may not be sufficient for improving the environment (Smith and Walpole 2005). Social capital—defined as 'the features of social organisation that are capable of improving the efficiency of society by facilitating mutually beneficial collective actions' (Hobbs 2000)—is also essential for any

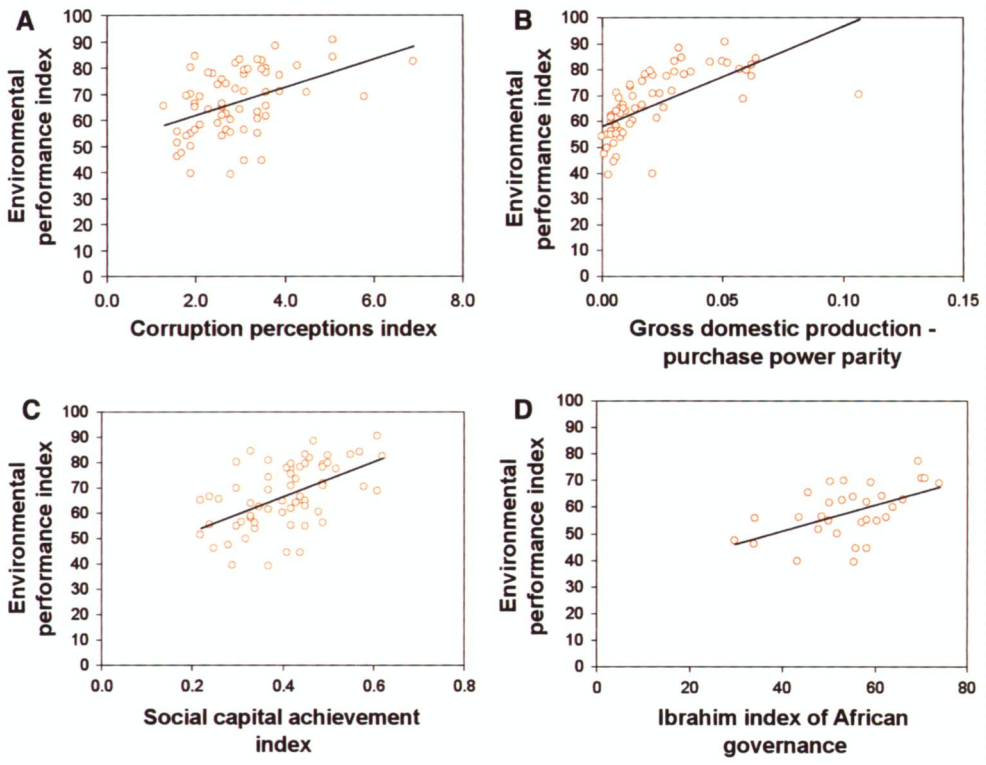

Fig. 1 Positive correlations: **a** between EPI and CPI amongst 66 tropical developing countries across the globe; **b** between EPI and GDP-PPP; **c** between EPI and SCA and **d** between EPI and Ibrahim index of African governance amongst 31 sub-Saharan countries

anticorruption drive. The Caux Round Table (2009) averaged scores across 14 different measurements of economic activity, quality of life plus legal and political institutions to measure a country's social capital achievement (SCA). We found that the positive link between SCA and EPI is significant ($n = 63$, $r = 0.522$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 1c). More importantly, after accounting for the longstanding nexus between income poverty and environmental performance (i.e. by removing the confounding effect of GDP-PPP) in General Linear Model (GLM), the effect of social capital on EPI remains significant ($F = 4.473$, $P = 0.039$).

On the regional level, there is still more evidence that halting graft is important for improving the environment. To determine if governance has an impact on environmental performance in sub-Saharan Africa, we analysed the relationship between EPI and the Ibrahim index of African governance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2009) using 31 sub-Saharan countries. To calculate a country's index of governance, Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2009) averaged its score across 57 different measurements of five indicators: the rule of law; corruption controls; political stability; participation and human rights; economic activity and human development. We found that the association between the two indices amongst sub-Saharan countries is significant ($n = 31$, $r = 0.526$, $P = 0.002$; Fig. 1d). Again, after accounting for confounding effect of poverty, GLM showed that environmental performance remains significantly associated with governance ($F = 6.927$, $P = 0.014$).

Next, we focus on the nexus of corruption and environmental performance in Cameroon, although it offers substantial parallels to sub-Saharan African region and other tropical developing countries. Cameroon is also an interesting choice, because it takes account of the burden of previous colonial experiences in Africa; uniquely amongst independent African countries, today's Cameroon is composed of former colonies run by Britain and France, rather than just one former imperial power. Cameroon can, therefore, serve as a lens for illustrating the corruption problems in the environment sector.

One of the striking features of sub-Saharan Africa is a weak ability of states to impose their legislation, even if governments are aware of the need to protect their natural environment. Our experience in Cameroon, a country where a large number of those who broke the law attempted to offer a bribe in return for covering up their criminal liability (The Last Great Ape Organization 2009) renders this apparent. At the country's faunal reserves, forest guards are on duty; yet, local delicacy meals—such as "chimpanzee á la sauce tomate"—are readily available, albeit for the princely sum of roughly US$ 5 apiece. It is not uncommon to find managers and guards in Cameroon's protected areas who neglect their responsibilities. Some are open to bribes from illegal hunters, poachers and logging companies. And, even if illegal hunters are apprehended by law-abiding guards, the temptation to sell on the confiscated forest products remains high. The market for such

illegal products is available, since demand for bush-meat continues to be strong as a matter of preference, despite the parallel availability of food from domestic animals.

Anti-corruption organisations have long tried to redress this situation in Cameroon by ensuring that national legislation—which is in place—is actually applied. For instance, the Last Great Ape Organization is crusading for the enforcement of wildlife-protection laws. However, leaving the burden of environmental protection to these organisations does not solve the fundamental problem, for neither Cameroonian government, the people nor some of the local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have much of a political will to improve their own measures.

The main contribution to environmental sector programmes in Cameroon comes from foreign aid programmes. For example, the UK's Department for International Development is distributing £11 million (US$ 21 million) to Cameroon's forestry sector, with an additional £50 million being made available to the Congo Basin Forest Fund, which is open to bids from many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

However, credit absorption remains a serious problem; many project bids are poorly conceived and, therefore, do not gain approval from donor organisations. And, even if a project passes the approval conditions laid down by foreign organisations, there is still the danger that corrupt practices could derail a project's execution; the injection of relatively large sums of money into poor societies usually invites corruption, although this is not a phenomenon confined to the sub-Saharan region of Africa alone.

Surprisingly, corruption surrounding the expense claims of environmental projects has infected some NGOs in Cameroon. Corrupt practices in these NGOs are undermining environmental protection and have a potential of leading to a precipitate collapse in public confidence in them. One example involves an organisation created and supported by the international community using public funds, which aimed to promote good governance and equitable, sustainable management practices in Cameroon's forest and environment; the organisation was recently found acting as a front for an illegal immigration scheme.

We used to have glimmers of hope. Anti-corruption efforts within Cameroon and the sub-Saharan African region could have gained momentum through the ratification at the African Union's convention on preventing and combating corruption and related crimes. The Cameroonian government had announced a new anti-corruption drive. This included the imposition of a requirement for civil servants to declare assets in their possession (Kwang Komenta 2006). Government officials were also trained with the anti-corruption tools recommended by the United Nations and the African Union (Vubem 2006). But such measures imposed from above have failed to percolate to the lower-ranking officials on whom the fate of tropical forests depends. Also, such measures seem to be irrelevant when the forest guards are still being kept in severe poverty. We have found, for instance, that forest guards at the Dja Faunal Reserve in south-east Cameroon had not received their salaries between February 2007 and March 2008. Minimising the impact of corruption on the environment cannot be accomplished if the people who are meant to implement protection measures are not treated fairly.

Although it is debatable whether poor governance is the catalyst for corruption permeating through all societal levels, cleaning up the deeds of a corrupt government is definitely a task which needs to be undertaken by both rulers and the ruled. First, Cameroonian government needs to recreate a usually dysfunctional judicial system. Government officials who are being accused of corruption must be called to account quickly, and justice must be done in an exemplary manner. But there is always the danger of a backlash, and some unintended consequences. For instance, if the opportunity to earn illicit revenue disappears, some government officials may lose any incentive to execute projects which offer no other opportunities for private gains. Employing people of high moral integrity is clearly the answer, but this is easier said than done.

Nevertheless, Cameroonian government should set out to fight illegal wildlife trade in order to create a disincentive for their citizens to become involved in poaching and the bush-meat trade. Through education and public awareness campaigns, local communities can become the first line of defence against illegal activities such as the misuse of short-term logging permits ostensibly meant for building roads or other development projects in order to just obtain access to timber.

Furthermore, the governments, donors and beneficiaries have to ensure that the additional resources for conservation and environmental projects—be they from the NGOs or from charities—are well utilised. Enhancing transparency is the key to strengthening governance and accountability; it is important for donors to know how their aid is spent, and for the government to maintain an audit. This transparency is not only essential for the good execution of existing programmes, but is also a mean for attracting additional funds; well-documented, successful projects usually gain further support, thereby establishing a virtuous circle of success being rewarded with more success. So, there is a clear incentive for the government to manage these programmes well.

Most of us have a pretty good idea about what a corrupt government is. But, it is unfair to put the blame entirely on poor governance. Poor social capital in Cameroon may also

be an underlying cause. However, social capital cannot be created quickly. What the government can do, however, is to supplement an effective law-enforcement programme with an efficient education and awareness campaign. It is also necessary to imbibe honesty in its citizens from early childhood so that they would not condone corrupt practices when they enter the country's workforce.

Though the focus of this article is on Cameroon, its arguments have broader implications in the fight against corruption in other tropical developing countries. Both governments and their citizens have to follow ethical principles, to work together in improving their environmental quality. Only in this way can these developing countries attract more foreign assistance. And members of the international community—conservationists, scientists and NGOs—should also take a lead by refusing to pay bribes for services, even if this provides an enticing shortcut to deliver services. For it is only in a corruption-free climate that financial aid can really reach its deserving recipients.

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