

By Charlie Hughes

One evening in June 2006, a friend and I talked over drinks with two women who had just finished their exams at the University of Sierra Leone. We spoke about exams, good and bad lecturers, and cheating. I asked the students whether it was possible to bribe their lecturers for better grades. The women swore they have not heard of this at their college. But they could not be sure.

Corruption is pervasive in Sierra Leone, so there is always this doubt. Integrity is the exception, not the rule.

I myself am culpable. When it was time to renew my car's annual license this year, I didn't bother to go the licensing authority. I gave 297,483 leones (US\$100) to a friend of mine who passed it onto somebody who worked at the licensing authority.

I had been complaining to my friend that I was too busy and didn't have time to go and renew my license. My friend told me that he knew somebody at the licensing office who could do it for me. It would have cost me about 208,238 leones (US\$70) to license my four-wheel drive car. I paid 297,483 leones (US\$100) to spare myself the hassle. In the evening my friend came by with the license.

The vehicle licensing authority is by no means alone in this behavior. Everything is for sale. One can even buy a death or birth certificate at the Births and Deaths Office for a fictitious death or birth!

You can register a company at the Registrar General's office in 48 hours for a bulk fee paid to a senior official there. The bulk fee would include charges payable to government and extras for the official doing the leg work. You can skip the extra payments to any official: but your company will not be registered in less than three weeks. When registering a company, you are required to first submit its name to ascertain whether any other company carries the same name. A clerk manually searches the names. The search will last for weeks if the clerk's palms are not greased. Of course, the clerk behaves as if he has the ability to determine the pace at which he can confirm your company's name.

I cited earlier the possibility of licensing a vehicle without it being physically inspected, or acquiring certificates for fictitious births and deaths. Corruption in these instances is about the willingness to bribe public officials when we fall short of procedural requirements, or seek to beat bureaucratic processes, or to ask public officials to ignore petty wrong doings.

Bribes enable citizens to shorten or bypass procedures with public officials. We easily use money to "shake hands" with public officials. It is commonly accepted—a way to say thanks for the job the official does.

Of course, public officials must willingly accept the bribes to complete the corrupt transaction. And maybe the habit persists because there is always a look on public officials' faces that seems to ask, "What's in this for me?" Many times, that question is even asked directly.

In fact, petty corruption is largely based around public officials' infusion of this question into public service. People's decisions to "shake hands" with a bribe are often skillfully prompted by the discretion public officials hold in these transactions.

This manipulation of discretion permeates every level of the public service. Senior officers determine when to sign your papers when you apply for state land, a telephone line, passport or mining license. Secretaries have the choice to give or not to give you application forms or book an appointment for you to see the Permanent Secretary.

Information about how one could go about securing a public service is also a discretionary transaction. That is why at the Customs Department there are lots of people hanging around "volunteering" for a fee to help you navigate procedures to clear your goods.

I should make the point, however, that these transactions do not have to work this way. The environment exists for members of the public to demand and get clean public services, or be involved in tackling corruption.

The ombudsman, for instance, says that a good number of complaints from individuals that his office has settled relate to public officials refusing or unnecessarily wasting time to provide public service.

There are District Budget Oversight Committees comprised of ordinary citizens established by the Ministry of Finance in all 12 administrative districts in the country. District Budget Oversight Committees monitor the implementation of public services and contracts awarded from public funds and report discrepancies to the Ministry of Finance or Anti-Corruption Commission. Indeed, reports by District Budget Oversight Committees have in some cases led to investigations by the police or the Anti-Corruption Commission.

Civil society organizations have ventured into the widening space for citizens' involvement in tackling corruption. Among the most prominent is the Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD). NMJD has been monitoring the implementation of contracts awarded by the government from the Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative funds provided by international donors. In May 2006 the organization released a damning report detailing projects that were not completed, badly done, or totally abandoned.

We also saw in August 2005, the chairman of the Town Council of Makeni, the regional capitol of the Northern province resign from office. The resignation was the culmination of a battle waged by local civil society organizations for months against the chairman on allegations that he misappropriated tens of thousands of U.S. dollars.

The government has made its own claims about the progress of processes like the Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) and institutions like the Anti-Corruption Commission. Since 2001 a PETS has been annually undertaken by the Ministry of Finance to track the effective and intended utilization of public service delivery funds allocated to ministries, departments and agencies. The PETS in 2002-2003 exposed that 50 percent of government school fee subsidies were lost

to corruption. The government acted on this, and is now able to claim that today 90 percent of schools fee subsidies reach their intended beneficiaries.

Who in the big towns and cities has not heard the Anti-Corruption Commission's slogan on the radio in our native tongue: "de yie day wach!" The eye is watching!

We are still talking about the on-going trial of a former minister of transport and communication, a former chairman of the Sierra Leone Ports Authority, a former accountant general, and a former permanent secretary in the Ministry of Transport and Communication. The four officials were charged in a fraud scandal in May 2005 over a 791 million leones (US\$266,000) transaction to buy a forklift for the Sierra Leone Ports Authority.

And in Freetown, who has not heard the name Gloria Newman-Smart? After less than two years as chief immigration officer, the late Newman-Smart was accused selling 26 illegal passports for 1.5 million leones (US\$520). The Anti-Corruption Commission investigated and determined that although no offence under the Anti-Corruption Act could be proved, there was a clear breach of procedure.

On January 19, 2006 a magistrate was convicted on a four-count charge of soliciting a bribe, in a prosecution by the Anti-Corruption Commission. A senior official of the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party insists that with instances like these, the threat that the "eye is watching" cannot be taken lightly.

The media, civil society organizations and opposition parties see it a little bit differently. They say the Anti-Corruption Commission is nowhere near its best, citing the government's unwillingness to prosecute certain cases. A case that is often cited is that of Okere Adams, former minister of marine resources, who is now minister of tourism. In 2005, the Anti-Corruption Commission arrested Adams on corruption allegations involving donor funds. However, the investigation remains stalled and to this day the matter has not found its way into the courts.

Corruption is the most talked about governance challenge facing the country. It is debated in taxis, at pubs and work places. Everyday newspapers in the country run stories about fraud or the misappropriation of public funds by government officials and businessmen. Commentaries and editorials on the pervasiveness of corruption abound in the media. Local songs like "Borboh Belleh," about the ills and pervasiveness of corruption, were hits last year.

But it is interesting to note that people hardly talk about the little bribes they pay to public officials.

The international community has fueled the corruption debate in Sierra Leone. In May 2005, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan issued a report on Sierra Leone to the United Nations Security Council. In that report, Annan said that citizens could see little progress in the fight against corruption. The government vehemently disputed the report.

One cannot help but reflect on the intensity of the corruption debate in relation to the number of anti-corruption institutions and processes that currently operate in the country. Are our hearts soothed when the Anti-Corruption Commission lists the

tens of corruption cases it has initiated? Do we wail or hail when the citizens' organization NMJD reports that hundreds of millions of leones of debt relief funds are lost through abandoned or uncompleted contracts?

In the fight against corruption, the message is mixed. Can I choose to see the glass as half full?

The head of state suggested as much in a speech to Parliament on June 23, 2006. President Kabbah said that the days when corruption could not be discussed were over. "Rather than being tolerated or exalted, reports of corrupt practices anywhere, particularly in government, are now regarded with the greatest contempt and, where proven, those involved attract lawful punishment and scorn in the society."

He paints an encouraging picture. On the contrary, opposition politicians that I spoke to in preparing this report were unanimous in their view: they see a glass that is very nearly empty.