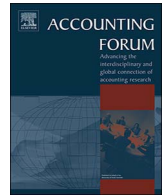


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Accounting Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/accfor

The politics of transnational accountability policies and the (re) construction of corruption: The case of Tunisia, Transparency International and the World Bank

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Transnational accountability
 Anti-corruption
 Tunisia
 Post-colonialism
 World Bank
 Transparency International

ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection between accountability policies and anti-corruption measures. Transnational actors define acceptable governance and implement accountability policies on the assumption that corruption is a problem endemic to developing countries. Such accountability policies influence and help constitute transnational geographic and social spaces. However, the impacts of such assumptions and the resultant policies on developing countries and their citizens have not been widely investigated. This study uses a critical discourse analysis of the case of Tunisia before and after its 2011 revolution, to explore the politics and vested interests specific to anti-corruption policies promoted by transnational actors. The study's contribution is twofold: Firstly, we identify the highly fungible character of the emanant cycles of Western-driven corruption discourses, and indicate their consequences in Tunisia. Secondly, we propose a future research agenda towards non-exploitative anti-corruption and accountability policies.

1. Introduction

Corruption is a global phenomenon (Wedel, 2014). It has been described as one of the great evils of our time and the single greatest obstacle to economic and social development (Hough, 2013). Transnational actors develop and implement accountability policies to address corruption within both public and private sectors around the world (Wilhelm, 2002). Some of the key transnational actors that produce such policies and strategies are international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Transparency International (TI), and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), such as the World Bank (WB), often working in close collaboration (Wang & Rosenau, 2001; TI, 2013a; OPIA, 2016). These transnational accountability structures promote the idea that everyone benefits when the market can work with minimal impediments. TI's corruption perception index (CPI) is a tool that attempts to measure corruption, and is widely employed, particularly in developing societies, to inform accountability policies. Some research suggests that such anti-corruption indexes provide a useful tool to deal with corruption and improve governance (Lindgreen, 2004; Wilhelm, 2002; Hough, 2013).

An established stream of critical research points out, however, that transnational actors have a political rather than neutral role, operating through intricate networks to enforce accountability policies that govern the everyday world (Djelic & Quack, 2011; Lehman, 2005). Studies show that anti-corruption policies that focus on the weakness of governance frameworks in developing

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.accfor.2017.10.005>

Received 13 March 2016; Received in revised form 24 October 2017; Accepted 31 October 2017

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countries typically ignore transnational corporations' role as the supply-side of corruption in their search for profits (Sikka & Lehman, 2015), and the complicity of many Western states in facilitating non-transparent economic activity (Financial Secrecy Index, 2017). The implications of how accountability policies are developed and implemented by transnational actors in specific developing country contexts are still not fully understood. The goal of this study is therefore to show how transnational actors employ specific discursive techniques and rationales to develop and implement accountability policies. We use the case of Tunisia which is revelatory and representative (Yin, 1994) of the implications of Western discourses of corruption and prescribed accountability measures in countries outside the core capitalist economies. The paper's contribution is twofold. Firstly, we identify the highly fungible character of emanant cycles of Western-driven corruption discourses, and explore their consequences in Tunisia. Secondly, we suggest future research avenues for the potential design of accountability measures that might be more just, less exploitative, and more respectful of social and economic diversity.

The paper is structured as follows: we begin by highlighting limitations in predominant research on anti-corruption, which appears to be based on a universal free market ideology whose implementation in a transnational economy reinforces unequal North-South power relationships (Sikka & Willmott, 2010). We then propose a more reflexive approach to designing accountability policies through which scholars and policymakers can avoid foreclosing alternative economic and social imaginaries and be respectful of difference (Fraser, 2005; Fraser, 2012). We go on to present our analysis of the transnational actors' discourses (i.e., the WB and TI) that illustrates three corruption (re)construction cycles. We next present our findings, which indicate the paradoxical effects of anti-corruption policies when these are developed in the absence of an open acknowledgement of divergent institutional, socio-economic and political interests of both their developers and the regulated subjects. Finally, we conclude that adjusting to a politics of difference can support the development of more ethical and just accountability policies, and we propose a future research agenda to move in this direction.

1.1. A neo-liberal quest: transnational accountability policies designed to stop corruption

The definition of corruption is equivocal and vague in current research, mirroring ambiguities surrounding the cross-border application of accountability policies aimed at stifling corruption. The ambiguity surrounding corruption is specifically highlighted by the Council of Europe, which states that "no precise definition can be found which applies to all forms, types and degrees of corruption or which would be acceptable universally" (Council of Europe, 1995). Studies typically define corruption as "a complex and multifaceted phenomenon" (Andvig & Fjeldstad, 2001, p. 7) and a global problem with universal characteristics (Otáhal, 2014). Corruption is conceptualized as undermining good governance, generating extra costs to businesses that engage in bribery, and imposing lost opportunities on those who do not engage in such practices (Caiden, Dwivedi & Jabbra, 2001). Corruption is often defined *ex negativo*, as the opposite of transparency (Florini, 2007), although dimensions of non-transparency or secrecy are inherent to the usual existence and functioning of private corporations (Costas & Grey, 2014). Studies often define corruption as involving the misuse of public office, i.e., "the illegitimate selling of government authority for private gain" (Bukovansky, 2006, p. 181; Thomas & Meagher, 2004, p. 2). Transnational actors such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) define corruption in a similar way such as "the active or passive misuse of the powers of public officials (appointed or elected) for private financial or other benefits". Likewise, the WB defines corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain (World Bank Country Brief, 2010) while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) defines it as "the abuse of authority or trust for private benefit" (Schiller, 2000, p. 21). Argandoña (2003, p. 257), however, emphasizes that corruption occurs not merely in the private-to-public sphere (where a private actor pays, or promises to pay, money to a public official) but also in private-to-private relationships.

Similarly, accountability can be defined in a multiplicity of different ways. "In the simple sense, accountability entails a relationship in which people are required to explain and take responsibility for their actions" (Sinclair, 1995, p. 220). For accountability to have meaning in specific contexts, it is necessary to identify which actors are responsible to whom, for what actions, and in what ways their accountability will be asserted; what Ahrens (1996) calls 'styles of accountability': the "link between normative discourses and organizational action ... a distinguishing way of giving and demanding reasons for conduct" (Ahrens, 1996, p. 140–141). There is a multiplicity of different styles and normative approaches to accountability, including hierarchical, negotiated, and democratic accountability among others (Roberts, 1991).

The question of accountability is of central importance in revolutionary and post-revolutionary transformations (Laswell, Lerner, & Easton Rothwell, 1952). The revolution entails the 'holding to account' of a previous ruling group, while the trajectory of the post-revolutionary period depends upon the success or otherwise of establishing new relationships and norms of legitimacy and accountability (Murphy, 2016). In a developing country such as Tunisia, however, such hierarchical accountability to citizens co-exists with accountability to international institutions that provide financial resources (in the case of the WB), which establishes credibility of the governance regime to the outside world (in the case of TI and its CPI). In contrast to the colonial state, where accountability was asserted directly and coercively (Kalpagam, 2000), in the postcolonial world accountability regimes are legitimized both as enactments of the will of the citizens of those states (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001), and as reflecting a scientific and neutral assessment based on the authoritative knowledge of the rating institutions (Plehwe, 2007). These accountability measures, such as TI's CPI, aspire to attain a ceremonial status that obscures close examination of their underlying content and implications (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Ezzamel, 2009).

A very different picture of the world emerges depending on how accountability is conceptualized (Everett, Neu, & Rahaman, 2007). Whereas 'developed' core capitalist countries score highly in corruption metrics such as those of TI, they score poorly on metrics of financial accountability, such as the Financial Secrecy Index (Cobham, Janský & Meinzer, 2015). These wide variations in measurements of related concepts of corruption, transparency, and accountability suggest that different actors, with different

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