

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 9

Issue 4 *April Roundtable: An Annotation of
"Cambodia's Curse" by Joel Brinkley*

Article 6

4-1-2009

Changing the Culture of Corruption - Do Small Steps Count?

Rhona Smith

Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), [Public Administration Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), and the [Social Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Rhona (2009) "Changing the Culture of Corruption - Do Small Steps Count?," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 9: Iss. 4, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol9/iss4/6>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

Changing the Culture of Corruption - Do Small Steps Count?

Abstract

Corruption is endemic in modern society, but history attests this problem is as old as states themselves. No single solution to date has garnered sufficient political and/or popular support to effect change. Could education play a role in changing the culture?

Keywords

Human rights, Cambodia, Post-war reconstruction, Peace, Stability, Corruption, Repression

Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

Changing the Culture of Corruption - Do Small Steps Count?

by Rhona Smith

Corruption is endemic in modern society, but history attests this problem is as old as states themselves. No single solution to date has garnered sufficient political and/or popular support to effect change. Could education play a role in changing the culture?

Cambodia is a country rich in natural resources and beauty. It is also, as Brinkley notes, a country with one-third of its population living in abject poverty. Life expectancy at birth is currently [59](#), a figure attributable to malnutrition and poverty. Even a casual tourist to Phnom Penh cannot fail to be aware of both the devastating aftermath of the Khmer Rouge years and the disparity in distribution of wealth today. Just as Brinkley's article was published, the first trial before [Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia](#) against [Kaing Guek Eav](#) commenced, legal wrangling over preliminary issues concerning [Ieng Sary](#) continues. Besmirched in controversy and allegedly riddled with corruption, [few seriously expect positive results](#) from the process, but it is nevertheless an essential cog turning the wheel towards Cambodia's international rehabilitation and towards national reconciliation. That corruption is a key problem identified by Brinkley is no surprise; "backhanders" and government impunity are features of all too many governments today. Cambodia is ranked 166 out of 180 countries in [Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2008](#), i.e. that organization considers it one of the most corrupt countries analyzed. In the Asia-Pacific region, only Afghanistan and Myanmar (Burma) are perceived to be more corrupt.

Articulation of an international response is difficult due to the entrenched international law principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of states. However, corruption impacts adversely and directly on a raft of international human rights and human rights is within the jurisdiction of the international community. Through corruption, rights to food, clean water, an adequate standard of living, equality before the law, to name but a few, are compromised to the extent they are rendered meaningless. Billions of dollars of aid globally is derailed en route to the intended recipients through corrupt governments and people. Treaties such as the [United Nations Convention Against Corruption](#) and rafts of national law seek to eradicate corruption and hold perpetrators criminally responsible for their actions. The potentially positive contribution of global business has also been harnessed with the addition of an anti-corruption principle to the [UN Global Compact](#). Yet corruption remains characteristic of many countries.

Law in itself has proven inadequate to fight corruption. If the reality of corruption, that it is killing large numbers of people and threatening the lives of millions more, is understood, surely political and/or popular impetus for change is achievable. Doing nothing indicates tacit approval. Obviously those directly effected are impotent to act, their lives and livelihoods endangered if they overtly challenge corruption (consider the [last elections in Zimbabwe](#), the [recent suspension and reinstatement of the chief justice of Pakistan](#), and the [fight against drug cartels in some Latin American countries](#)). However, other states and civil society can and should act to encourage ethical practices and limit corruption. Within corruption-riddled countries, education can also play a role in ending corruption as children are taught (in home and school) what is and what is not appropriate. Awareness of the negative connotations associated with corruption can thus start

at an early age rather than children experiencing positive reinforcement of the necessity of bribes and similar payments for services and/or services to be rendered.

Education and anti-corruption legislation may still prove insufficient to force a cultural shift in attitudes, but they plant seeds of change. Fairness and transparency in education is a start. After all, human rights education must reflect respect for human rights within education. Anti-corruption legislation, assuming it is properly implemented, can make a real difference; but in corrupt regimes, undue pressure may be brought to bear on prosecutors, judges and other investigators. The burden of impartiality and pursuit of justice is heavy and many have paid with their lives.

Respect for basic human dignity is predicated on equality of all. All Cambodians should be equal and existing discriminatory practices should end. Salaries for educators should be commensurate with an adequate standard of living; those implicated in corruption should be held to account; and elections should be fair and free, not the preserve of the rich. Developing a culture of mutual respect and equality should lead in time away from a blanket acceptance of insidious corruption as a “way of life.” Although progress may be slow and the process long, surely any steps along this path are worth pursuing.

Rhona K.M. Smith is Professor of International Human Rights at [Northumbria University](#), Newcastle, UK. She is also the [Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law](#) (RWI) Visiting Professor in Human Rights at [Peking University Law School, Beijing University, PR China](#). She has authored various texts on International Human Rights Law and worked on human rights education capacity building projects particularly in China and Indonesia through RWI and the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights. She has taught human rights at universities in Canada, China, England and Scotland.