



COMMUNITY AND PUBLIC EDUCATION: THE HONG KONG EXPERIENCE

Presented by:

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to join you here and share with you the experience of Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). Our discussion today centres on community involvement and public education. At first glance, one would say that fighting crime, including tackling corruption, is the job of law-enforcement agencies. So why should the community be involved? And why is education necessary? Legitimate questions. But perhaps Hong Kong's experience can help provide the answers.

Engaging ordinary citizens in the battle against corruption is not unique to Hong Kong. Many law-enforcement agencies around the world also rely on their citizens to report graft. However, what is unique about Hong Kong is perhaps the degree of reliance on the community's input in our anti-corruption cause. Our residents' unflagging determination to eradicate corruption was pivotal in building up the momentum of fighting graft in the early years. The ICAC was created by public demand. Ever since the ICAC's establishment in 1974, the community had hardly failed to lend its support to our work. Those who are not familiar with Hong Kong's anti-corruption history may ask: what lessons can be drawn from the Hong Kong experience? How did Hong Kong manage to get the community's wholehearted commitment to tackling the problem which was once commonly considered to be so intractable.

The Early Days

Hong Kong's experience of dealing with corruption had dated back to decades before the establishment of the ICAC. As far back as 1897, Hong Kong had laws against corruption and bribery. In the late 1940s, non-civil service members of the Colonial Government's inner cabinet voiced the need for more vigorous efforts to reduce corruption. As a result the Prevention of Corruption Ordinance was passed in 1948 and four years later, the Police Force's Anti-Corruption Branch was set up.

Notwithstanding the early years' attempts to reduce corruption, the essential problem remained unchecked. Many in the community were victimised in the sense that they were forced to pay bribes to survive. Angry and frustrated as ordinary people were, they remained conspicuously silent. Their muted reaction might partly be due to their general perception that paying bribes to get things fixed quickly was a fact of life. And even those who did see a problem did not speak up because Chinese tradition was to look to those in authority for solutions whenever a problem popped up. Many in the community were simply unable to see their role in changing society. So when the authority appeared to be unwilling, or worse still, powerless, to deal with the corrupt, people believed that there was nothing more they could do to turn the tide.

A dramatic change of mood did not come about until two high profile cases involving senior police officers were brought to public attention. The community felt so strongly that some decisive action should be taken that the Government, for the first time, felt genuine pressure for change. The community's message was loud and clear — they wanted to clean up society. It was against this background that the ICAC, independent of all government departments including the Police, was established.

Facilitating Community Involvement

The strongest deterrent against corruption is public opinion which censures and condemns corrupt practices. But speaking out against corruption is one thing and actively participating in the endeavour by reporting graft is another. In Hong Kong's case, the community had indeed voiced their disapproval of bribery. However, in spite of the sufferings that many people had endured, they hesitated to be personally involved in the anti-graft effort. Uncertain about whether the Government, or specifically the ICAC, meant business, they were fearful of revenge. To many of them — hawkers, mini-bus drivers and labourers — whistle blowing was a high risk business. For reporting graft meant targeting those with power, mainly policemen and public servants whom they believed had a say in their livelihood. So despite the public outcry for decisive action in the early days, the process of enlisting active public support was not at all smooth sailing.

To persuade the community that their involvement would make an impact, the ICAC concluded that we had to first address the concerns and sensitivity of the man in the street. We had to convince the public that they would not run a risk in reporting corruption. As many of the victims or witnesses of the crime were not very well educated, we also had to impress upon them that lodging a complaint was not such a difficult and complicated thing. Therefore on the very first day of the ICAC's operation, we set up a hotline to take complaints. Manned by officers who were fully aware of the public's sensitivity, the hotline was operated round the clock.

To beef up our case intake capability, about a year after the establishment of the ICAC, local offices were also set up in the neighbourhood of corruption-plagued areas. The offices were meant to provide easy access for those who wanted to report graft. Noting their concern about possible revenge, we pledged that every complaint would be treated with strict confidence and we also made a conscious decision to locate our local offices at less conspicuous places so that complainants would be less worried that they might be seen going to an ICAC office. To facilitate those who were unable to pay a visit during office hours, we broke the norm of government working hours of Nine-to-Five by keeping open from eight in the morning till ten at night. And in the early years, there were not any public holidays or weekends for our local offices — we operated throughout the year as we wanted the community to know that we were there whenever they were ready to talk to us. The exceptional arrangement was a demonstration to the public that we valued the community's participation.

Our strategy proved to be correct. In the first few years of our operation, we received more than 3,000 complaints annually. With scores and scores of the corrupt convicted and sentenced, the community's confidence in the ICAC started to grow. A direct result was the growing willingness of complainants to identify themselves in lodging their complaints. And more and more people were willing to report in person, especially those who reported through our local offices. To give you an idea, in 1974 when the ICAC was set up, non-anonymous reports took up only about a third of our total number of complaints. Today, the proportion has leapt to cover more than two-thirds of the tally. The local offices have proved to be an useful alternative to our main Report Centre at the Headquarters. In the past two decades, between 20 to 35 per cent of the reports the ICAC received came through our local offices and consistently, about 60 per cent of the local office reports were lodged in person.

The Need for Education

Facilitating the public to report corruption is only the first step to control and reduce it. To develop a clean culture is our ultimate objective. When we set up the local offices, we knew that for the battle against corruption to go in full swing, we needed not only to muster the support of those who were directly affected by corruption, but also to convert those who did not see bribery as a personal problem. We had to convince the community that they all had a stake in fighting corruption. They needed to understand that the hidden costs of bribery were borne by all while the benefits were not.

Double-barrelled approach

To change public attitude is no easy task. Knowing the difficulty, we decided that a double-barrelled approach in raising public awareness and enlisting support would be needed. To make an impact, we believed that the issue of corruption needed to be debated on television and radio, discussed in classrooms and brought to the forefront of the public agenda. Therefore until today the intensive face-to-face contact and the extensive use of the mass media are adopted in our preventive educational work.

Face-to-face contact

Apart from taking complaints, a key function of our local offices is to maintain direct contacts with members of the community. The direct contacts are important as they provide us with the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings that the public may have and they also give us the chance of getting immediate feedback from the community on the quality of our service. We conduct our liaison work mainly through our eight local offices. In addition to talking to the man in the street, our officers are also trained to deal with designated targets such as civil servants, businessmen, young people and our work contacts in Mainland China.

a. Civil service

The civil service, especially the police force, attracted the highest number of complaints in the early years. In the mid 1970s when the ICAC was still young, complaints against government departments made up about 85 per cent of all corruption reports received. Today, the percentage has dropped by half. Over the years, we have conducted hundreds of talks for assorted ranks of civil servants. And guidelines on civil service integrity are provided to government staff to ensure that they understand the importance of maintaining a high ethical standard in delivering their services to the community.

b. Business sector

While the number of complaints against private businesses was not high in the early days, the trend began to change in the 1980s. In light of the development, we have adjusted our work programme to direct more resources to publicise our messages to private companies. Talks and training seminars have been conducted for staff and managers of private enterprises. An Ethics Development Centre, established under the auspices of the ICAC and with the support of leading chambers of commerce in the territory, was set up in 1995 to promote ethics and anti-corruption messages on a long term basis.

c. Young people

Young people are our future and we firmly believe that promoting positive values among them is important. For instance, we talk to students on values such as the correct attitudes towards money and the importance of fair play. And we produce moral education packages for teachers and youth workers to deploy in classrooms and youth activities.

d. Mainland liaison

To enhance co-operation between the ICAC and anti-corruption agencies in Mainland China, we set up a Mainland Liaison Office in 1996. The office organises regular exchange visits and conducts talks for our mainland counterparts to enhance their understanding of our work.

Mass Media

Face-to-face contacts are effective but they are also expensive. That is

why we have also made extensive use of the mass media to spread our messages. The ICAC was the first public organisation to exploit the mass media to garner public support. We were the first public organisation to launch television commercials and produce television dramas and animation series to disseminate educational messages. Our programmes are very popular not only in Hong Kong, but also in many parts of the Mainland. The television dramas, all based on real corruption cases in Hong Kong, were cited by people both locally and across the boundary as the source of their knowledge of the work of the ICAC.

Partnership — The Winning Formula

In closing, I have three points to make. First, involving the community is the prerequisite of any successful campaign to tackle corruption. Members of the public have to be fully aware of the evils of graft. Without the community's involvement in the effort, a first class investigative agency feared by all may still lose the battle.

Second, personalising corruption, explaining clearly and explicitly how ordinary citizens are personally disadvantaged by corruption in society, is the most effective means to encourage community involvement.

Thirdly, corruption is not easy to detect. But no intelligence network is more extensive and effective than one formed by members of the public working together. The community must be encouraged to report corruption. They must be willing to come forward to report it.

Ladies and gentlemen, the ICAC has 25 years of experience of fighting graft. To sum up our experience, we conclude that there is only one successful formula in the battle against corruption — to engage our citizens in our effort and to form an enduring partnership with our people. The formula has served us well. I hope you may find our experience useful too.