



Phones Against Corruption

Name: Phones Against Corruption

Organization: United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

Year launched: 2014

Countries: Papua New Guinea

Users: nearly 5,000 complaints received

In late 2014, Dr. Ken Ngangan was appointed as the new head for Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Department of Finance (DoF). Wanting to create a more transparent environment for dealing with issues, he had a suggestion box placed near the entrance of the office for people to drop grievances and suggestions into.

However, after three months there was no complaint found. This was partly due to PNG's supportive and communal culture –the 'wantok system' (literally "one talk") – that bound the community together as a social security system, where people extend help to each other in times of need. Thus no one wanted to appear as if they were reporting on a friend. On the other extreme, the 'wantok' system provided an environment for people to do unlawful activities under the table and receive kickbacks. Many government departments and agencies were rife with corruption related cases and allegations, including the DoF. An intervention was desperately needed within DoF to act. Something that would empower staff to come forward without fear of retribution and report cases of corruption, hence serve as a preventative measure to insure transparency and accountability to the public service and management of public funds.

Conscious of this system and the need to find a way to address PNG's entrenched corruption levels, DoF and UNDP's PNG Office jointly explored innovative approaches for a contextually feasible system to receive and process complaints. At that time, UNDP PNG was already running a program with the DoF called the "Provincial Capacity Building and Enhancement Program." The program aimed at strengthening the public finance management, accountability and reporting at the sub-national level of government. By 2018, the project was running in its third phase and was funded by the Australian Government.

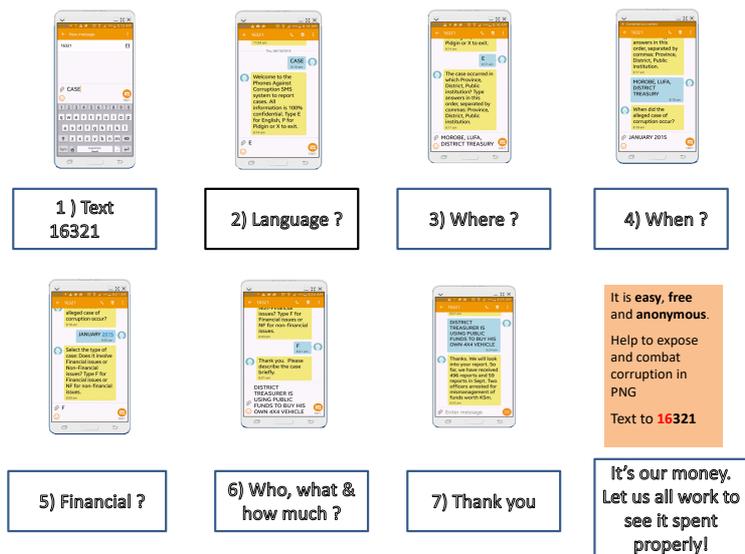
Within the project, a team of three, consisting of both UNDP and DoF staff decided to explore the "Phones Against Corruption" idea – to create an anonymous SMS text-based system for citizens to report an act of corruption. This idea was sensible, smart and low-cost given the proliferation of mobile phones and mobile penetration in PNG. When Digicel entered the mobile market in PNG in 2006, the telecom company led an aggressive campaign and dramatically increased access and coverage of mobile phone users to more than 3 million people. This meant that the SMS-based approach would enable more participation than an internet-based application which still had low access rates and coverage compared to mobile phone.

The Phones Against Corruption project engaged a telecommunication and a technology partner. How the system worked was as follows: a concerned citizen would send an SMS regarding a corruption incident, it went straight to the telecommunications company. The SMS was then

accessed and encrypted by the technology company and then sent on as an encrypted case number to DoF. This meant complete anonymity for the sender. It worked on any mobile phone type, even very basic ones. The service was available in both English and *Tok Pisin* (PNG's local language) and free-of-charge to the user. The SMS system was automated providing a series of questions for the user to fill-in - required information to assist with generating evidence for the case - and then concluded with the number of cases handled to date.

Immediately following the launch of the project, it generated high numbers of complaints starting with 110 SMS in 2014, which more than doubled in 2015. Today, there are 500 complaints yearly on average and over time the numbers have dropped.

DoF kept faith in the project and supported it, although there was little initial donor provision. Phones Against Corruption also received support from its larger program: the Capacity Building and Enhancement Project unit. PNG Government covered all administrative costs, and Government of Australia's DFAT supported for advocacy and awareness costs, such as flyers, billboards, and workshops. In late 2016, the DoF entered the project in a UNDP regional competition for "Anti-Corruption for Peaceful and Inclusive Societies" co-hosted by DFAT. From over 50 proposals submitted, 23 proposals were



How Phones Against Corruption works

shortlisted and invited to present in Bangkok, of which 8 finalists were invited to pitch for the projects in Singapore. PNG's Phones Against Corruption proposal was among one of the winners and was offered \$200,000 in funding to expand the project to other government departments.

With the additional funding, the DoF engaged an IT consultant to design an in-house database to organize the in-coming SMS data. When the cases were received, DoF quickly scrutinized the cases and made a determination. Depending on the nature and threshold of the severity, heavier cases were handled by the DoF internal audit unit and lighter cases were sent on to the respective internal audits of the government department or agency concerned.

In the initial phase, the project faced challenges with the initial technology partner. In early 2017, the program had to be temporarily switched off because of compatibility issues between the telecommunications partner based in PNG and the technology partner based in Australia. Subsequently, the project switched to a new technology partner based in Fiji after redeveloping the reporting platform.

While the project was proving successful in drawing anonymous complaints, it had its limitations. By mid-2018, it did not have a feedback loop to provide a status update of cases individual senders reported. In addition, due to the anonymity of the complains, it was difficult to have witnesses during prosecution or trials that led to corruption cases being dismissed for lack of substantive physical evidence.

Despite the limitations, the DoF partially attributed PNG's improvement in the Transparency International's corruption perception index to Phones Against Corruption. From 2014-2017, PNG's

rank moved up by 10 points and its overall score by 4 points on the corruption perception index that estimates the level of corruption of participating countries. Outcomes translated in attitudinal change against corruption were hard to measure at this stage, but the DoF was confident that Phones Against Corruption had influenced some positive strides in the fight against corruption.

At the time of this case, UNDP and DoF were trying to scale-up the project to include an additional 43 government agencies within PNG. Certain departments such as Education were planning to use the tool to monitor the 13,000 institutions it oversaw in the country on matters relating misuse of resources or bad teacher behavior. The DoF was optimistic that this phase would generate more traction and momentum on the fight against corruption in PNG.

“Phones Against Corruption is a preventative measure to ensure public funds are used for the purposes intended and smooth flow of goods and services,” said Mr Tom Tiki, the DoF officer leading the project. He explained, “good lessons were learned from its initial phase and we are improving as we progress and scale-up to the include other government agencies.” While expanding on the limitations and resources necessary to keep the project going, he added, “It’s going to be very resource intensive and challenges with resources, as always but we are committed to the cause.”

Key success factors: strong partnership that existed before this project; strong project owner within DoF; technology solution that was fast, cheap, and simple

Key challenge: Phones Against Corruption is limited in its use as a detective solution for corruption as it struggles to effectively prosecute in courts due to anonymous nature of texts

Summary	Tech		Scale	Partners	Impact	Success Factors	
SMS system that allows anonymous collection of corruption complaints	MID TECH	Primary tech used: SMS	SCALING	Government, public sector	SOCIAL INTERNAL	Initiative: Simple, strong project owner	Organizational: Culture of trust, dedicated staff time