Fighting Kleptocracy with Human Stories in Five Central African Countries
Learning Report

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> **Objective of this note:** To share insights with the open governance, anti-corruption, and adaptive learning communities about how to strengthen locally-led efforts to combat kleptocracy in five Central African countries.

Fighting kleptocracy

Kleptocracy is a complex and evolving threat with dire implications for people in countries around the world and security implications for the world's democracies. There is no single, replicable way to tackle and solve the problem. However, kleptocracy's transnational dimension emphasizes the need to coordinate internationally and at various levels, and requires governments and civil society to build on each other's work and strategies. If kleptocrats are connected and enabled through a network of facilitators in the west, we need to be connected and support those whose resources are being stolen.

While there are many efforts to tackle different aspects of kleptocracy; from beneficial ownership registries, to global sanctions, to criminal investigations and investigative reporting, very little has been done at the country level. At Global Integrity (GI) we believe those at the frontlines are [best placed to figure out how to best tackle kleptocracy](#) in their countries, which can then inform global strategies.

The project: How to support locally-led efforts to fight kleptocracy

In 2019, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a nascent coalition of Central Africa civil society organizations leading the fight against kleptocracy with locally-led solutions from within their home countries, started working closely with us as their coordination, learning and implementation partner. Taking on the requested role, we were able to provide support by developing a joint strategy, providing implementation support and by helping all partners reflect on the progress made.

The core idea was to jointly develop a theory of change that would help all coalition partners be as clear as possible about the desired goals, the assumed pathways of change and underlying assumptions in order to generate a roadmap for coordinated action. Regularly reflecting on whether our assumptions

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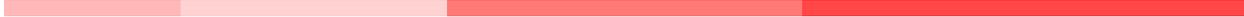
about change panned out or whether adaptations were useful, allowed the coalition to tailor its actions to be as effective as possible. Supporting reflection processes about effective action at country level helped to unlock synergies at the regional level.

The coalition decided to focus on educating citizens about the negative impact of kleptocracy in their daily lives in order to sensitize them and prepare a spring board for citizen engagement in the years to come. The hypothesis is that if citizens understand the impact of kleptocracy, they will feel motivated to demand greater accountability, which — given a future window of opportunity — will be a key building block to increase the pressure on governments to change policy and practice to ensure countries have a fairer and more equal distribution of resources.

After agreeing on an overall objective, we supported the coalition in setting out an appropriate action plan, aimed at educating young citizens to understand the systemic nature of the problem, instead of perceiving corruption as being "cool" and as a way to make a living — a social norm dynamic too often underappreciated in western anti-corruption programming.

The coalition partners

- **Angola - Friends of Angola**
  Joined in March 2021, its mission is to raise the consciousness of the world community on the challenges facing Angola and to support Angolan civil society.
- **Cameroon - ADISI**
  Founder of the coalition in 2018, focuses on three areas: access to information and public data, freedom of expression and press, open data and Data Journalism.
- **Chad - Public Interest Law Center**
  Founder of the coalition in 2018, its mission is to promote access to justice for the poorest
- **Congo-Brazzaville - Sassoufit**
  Founder of the coalition in 2018, its mission is to defend human rights and promote democracy.
- **Equatorial Guinea - EG Justice**
  Founder of the coalition in 2018, its mission is to promote human rights, the rule of law, and civic engagement.
- **Coordination partner - Global Integrity**
  Joined in 2019, its mission is to provide tailored support to governance reformers and change agents, strengthening their ability to address challenges relating to corruption and the use of public resources.
- **Data and Journalism - Finance Uncovered**
  Joined in 2020, its mission is to improve the quantity and quality of investigative stories that are rooted in illicit finance or exploitation by training and supporting journalists and activists around the world.

What we focused on

Phase 1

During the first phase of the project — from 2019 to 2020 — we supported the coalition in setting out its theory of change and taking all necessary steps to put it into practice. This included working on three things: First, to collect in one site all information about transnational kleptocratic cases made available by international investigative reporting; Second, to translate the information into human stories — easy to understand by citizens in their country contexts; And third, to present and disseminate the newly created stories through social media.

Phase 2

Following the first phase, the coalition decided to expand its reach and impact in a second phase in 2021 and 2022. Angola joined the coalition as a fifth country and a focus was set on story-telling through a short video series in order to capture the impact of kleptocracy within each country. This was done to reach a wider audience, particularly women and youth. A secondary goal was to showcase how kleptocracy is a regional challenge to create more global awareness and start building a network of allies beyond country and regional level.

Assumptions

A key assumption underpinning this project, the actions by journalists and civil society advocates on anti-corruption and anti-kleptocracy efforts world-wide is that information about the detrimental effects of corruption must be made available to sensitize citizens and harness their collective power to demand accountability and change when a window of opportunity opens up. At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence that questions whether simple anti-corruption messaging through billboards or social media does have the desired effects, or whether it plays into the hands of kleptocrats resulting in higher levels of apathy.

The coalition acknowledges that there is a risk, however notes that existing evidence comes from projects implementing strategies in different regions and contexts. Central Africa has been a black box for many years, particularly due to the complete capture of the state. The countries have been controlled by iron-fist dictatorships for decades, so citizens have not had the space to talk or reflect about corruption and its impact. On top of that, youth in these countries admire kleptocrats, seeing the exploits of their corruption as "cool"; those cars, houses, yachts or trips are something they aspire to get too. If one day they can obtain a government post, they will get a piece of the cake, too, they believe.

As a result, the coalition believes the best way to start creating a space that will in the future help create a path for citizen engagement, is to invest in the long game, by helping to build the foundations for citizen engagement and mobilization when the window of opportunity presents itself. The coalition is fully aware this initiative is just one piece of the puzzle: creating an initial space for citizens to feel empowered to reflect and discuss is a first step towards building an active citizenry. It is the coalition's belief — and we support their current assessment — that one can't expect citizens to act if they don't even know they could have a role in deciding how they are governed. So this project bets on the
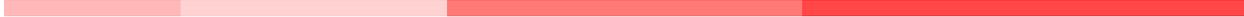
importance of laying the groundwork for citizen engagement, and we won't be able to test the efficacy of this theory until the window presents itself.

We are also aware that the coalitions' programming might have unintended consequences. For example, there might be an increased threat of retaliation toward local actors. As a coalition led by those on the ground, we have collectively decided to accept this risk and to keep a diligent eye on any developments whether they are neutral, positive or negative. Any additional interest and support by funders to holistically and systematically monitor and track intended and unintended consequences would be very welcome and could be of great value to strengthen and enhance a potential third phase.

What we set out to learn

While we believe it is important to be clear about the goals to achieve and the assumptions underlying the project and any actions taken, we decided not to set out a cost-intensive — and in this context potentially dangerous and volatile — Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning framework targeted at collecting insights from regular citizens. Instead, we decided to establish a learning journey framework — guided by key key learning questions — as a suitable path for tracking and understanding actions and adaptations based on the experiences and perspectives our partners would contribute throughout the course of the project.

To do so, we created space for regular reflection moments with the intent to help the coalition operate in learning-centered ways to help us understand the effectiveness of our actions and adapt where useful. When we kicked off the project we set out four overarching questions that would help guide the coalition's learning journey, while also providing a north star when evaluating progress. These overarching questions are:

- ○ How to work as a coalition to fight kleptocracy in Central Africa?
- ○ How can the coalition connect local and international efforts to fight kleptocracy?
- ○ Are there benefits for the coalition to work through cycles of action and learning?
- ○ What does progress look like when we work towards the ultimate goal of sensitizing citizens?

What we have learned, challenges we've faced, and how we addressed them

Working for over three years with the coalition, we have learned important lessons that have helped us better understand, shape and adapt to help make the coalition's efforts more effective.

What has worked well:

Working as a coalition

- Focusing on cycles of deliberate action and learning has helped the coalition figure out — through experimentation and reflection — how to best work together with a project that is aimed at operating at both national and regional levels. Starting a regional conversation and making links between the local and the regional by slowly depicting the larger picture of Kleptocracy in Central Africa has helped to make first steps toward the intended impact.

- This meant the organizations had to set aside (at least for a moment) the priorities and the approaches they had thought effective in their countries on their own (such as Political Exposed Persons' databases, Investigative and Open Data Reports to do citizen mobilization) in favor of agreeing and pursuing a collectively shared idea. There was no precedent of collective work in the region, particularly looking at kleptocracy through a local lense. Through a facilitated session, partners designed a theory of change that made sense for the region and helped set a common goal and approach. The coalition agreed that to bridge international efforts particularly the wealth of information available on kleptocracy cases, they needed to connect the struggle and impact of the grand scale corruption on their citizens. For the first time in the region, the project piloted the idea of putting the struggles of the common citizen at center stage of the kleptocracy fight.

- Learning how to work together by consciously joining the dots was a key element of the theory of change and proved to be an important and useful challenge requiring attention throughout. Each partner had important ideas of what they wanted to do and how they could contribute; identifying ways of working together as a coalition and agreeing on the level of efforts, has proven pivotal in order to usefully contextualize country level work, linking it to efforts and achievements at regional level.

- During the first phase, the partners were able to meet in person and discuss the project. In the second phase this was not possible due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Angola was added in the second phase and partners had to work and communicate entirely remotely. This meant that some sessions had to be conducted 1.1 with organizations who could not connect to a group discussion. It also required an increase in written communication. Despite the challenges, particularly in finding time where all partners could connect, the work

was able to continue. A second phase was implemented, continuing with the idea of centering the struggles of citizens within the kleptocracy fight.

○ Working in a coalition meant also to agree on an implementation plan that worked for everyone, accommodated specific country needs and divided the work among everyone. For example in its second phase, the partners agreed to do a launch of a campaign around the Africa Union-European Union summit, develop accompanying materials and a launch schedule that took into account specific dates that each partner needed. Global Integrity helped coordinate all the tasks, while Finance Uncovered supported the data and video development.

○ Working as a coalition also helped increase the capacity of each individual organization, either by having the opportunity to draw on each other's expertise, or by working together to achieve something they would not have the capacity to do individually.

Connecting international and local efforts

○ Most efforts against kleptocracy have taken place at the international stage by bringing litigation in western countries, pushing for sanctions against kleptocrats, publishing investigative reports by international journalistic consortiums. But those efforts had not reached the country level, this is where the coalition saw an opportunity to create a bridge and ensure efforts were building on each other.

○ The coalition found it important that international actors did not lose sight of the victims of kleptocracy, instead of focusing solely on the kleptocrats themselves or their enablers. The coalition theorized that acknowledging the victims of kleptocracy and putting citizens at the core of their efforts would create a receptive audience at both the local and global levels to push for policy reforms.

○ This project was the first of its kind in the region, showing the international community a path to working with local organizations and how international efforts can connect with local work, in a meaningful and contextualized way. Its impact is still being measured but this project has received international acknowledgement by being recognized as a legitimate effort to fight kleptocracy at the country level. As an example, the project was featured in IRI's [The Kleptocract's Playbook](#).

○ The first phase of the project focused on translating the wealth of information about kleptocracy; how much money was stolen, where, how it happened into citizens stories; how citizens were impacted, how the lack of basic services and needs was a direct result of the looting by the ruling elites. The first phase allowed the coalition's work to be put in the map among peers working at the international level.

○ The second phase, continued with the same concept of putting victims centerstage but refocused on making the stories more accessible. In its second phase the project received more media coverage.

Cycles of learning and action

○ One of the first challenges we encountered on our learning journey was finding the right tools to help our partners reflect and adapt. We initially used an excel spreadsheet with indicators, but it proved quickly to be too burdensome to be helpful. After several iterations, the coalition decided the best approach for them to learn was through facilitated and guided conversations that we could record and keep track of, so we adapted to a before action and after action method of reflection.

○ Partners appreciated that GI could play a role that went beyond being a learning partner, while appreciating the value of having structured monthly learning sessions to reflect on and discuss strategy supporting the implementation of activities. GI taking on a role as coordinator for activities and for ensuring agreed-upon responsibilities were implemented helped to ensure efficient use of the limited resources provided for the project and helped the coalition partners focus on what they could do best. This finding corroborates the utility of having a partner act as the backbone partner to a collective action effort to keep track of all the moving pieces throughout. This responsibility fit nicely with the learning partner role, in that it allowed us to guide the learning journey in a way that kept track of the different activities and challenges that were faced by partners throughout the project.

○ In addition, action and learning cycles proved key when addressing the impact COVID-19 had during the first phase of the project. While working on the human stories and the social media campaign about to be launched, the COVID-19 pandemic erupted and forced an immediate rethink in terms of strategy and timing. Conceiving of the COVID-19 impact as a window of opportunity helped the coalition to re-think their strategy and adapt. If the space hadn't been existent to think through the strategy from a regional level and with an eye to long-term impact, coalition members agreed they would have instead focused on their countries and wouldn't have kept the connection between the lack of health services and its connection to kleptocracy at the forefront of our efforts.

○ The coalition issued a press release highlighting how COVID-19 was not the root cause of these countries' strained health systems, but rather that the pandemic exposed how kleptocracy had created a perfect storm as the health institutions were already suffering from a lack of funds and were run by close allies of the ruling elite.

Making progress towards educating citizens

- During the first phase, the coalition decided to use written storytelling formats through a website and amplify their impact through a social media campaign in order to raise awareness among citizens. Personal stories are more appealing and translate more immediately to a woman in Congo or Chad to provide examples about what millions of stolen dollars actually mean to them and their lives.

- However, once the stories were launched on the website and through social media, we learned that youth and particularly women were harder to reach, and that there was medium to low interaction on social media.

- While the reach to audiences was not as large as expected, the success of the first pilot relies on testing the concept of putting the victims of kleptocracy centersage. This approach has been assessed by the coalition as the right pathway into citizens awakening while also connecting to a larger cross-national issue. Based on feedback received by partners from in-country activists and peers at international spaces once the site was launched, it was fairly positive; as one colleague had put it this were "stories that they could actually understand and identify with", while international partners highlighted the innovative approach of making something work at both regional and country level.

- This was the first time a project fighting kleptocracy aimed to reach citizens at the country level. In itself this pilot has paved the way for other initiatives, opening the space for more efforts and to prepare the ground for when a window of opportunity arises, the civil society space and citizens are open to engage.

- Taking the concept further of centering the campaigns around citizens and learning from the challenges encountered during the implementation of the first phase, the coalition conceived of using short videos instead — in order to target younger audiences and make stories more accessible at the country level.

- From this second phase, we saw more social media engagement. Also thanks to the partners reaching out and engaging with journalists both national and international, the campaign received more media coverage. In the first phase, with the website unfortunately no articles were published. In comparison the videos received coverage by 8 journals.

Areas of growth and how we addressed them in a second phase:

As with all learning journeys, there are always areas of growth and opportunity. The coalition particularly focused on the question as to whether the contextualized stories about kleptocracy help citizens be more aware and incentivized to join social movements and take action to press for change. Within that question, the coalition found three areas of growth that will help shape the second phase:

- Communication strategy: Even with limited resources, it is important to have a communications expert to aid our plan both at the national and regional level, so it builds into what is already happening. To address this, the coalition worked with a regional communications expert who advised the coalition and helped implement a communications plan for the second phase.

- Understanding media consumption: Each partner needs to have a better understanding in-country media consumption to ensure greater reach and impact. Addressing this meant that during the second phase, the organizations worked with local crews who had a better understanding of how the videos can be distributed and circulated. As well as identified local journalists and peers who could help promote the video stories.

- Target audience: After the website was launched the partners realized they needed to focus more on youth and women. And that their campaign should have considered how to go beyond an educated minority. So it has adapted its approach for the second phase, using short videos targeting young audiences and women who are less receptive to wordy campaigns.

Putting adaptations into action: implementing a second phase

The areas of growth identified by the coalition during our cycles of learning and action from the first phase helped shape the evolution of the project and helped define areas where the coalition needed to pay special attention and effort. Once the group identified that to develop the concept further of putting victims at the center stage of the kleptocracy fight, they needed to adapt their approach and refine the communications strategy, and have a better understanding of the media consumption and its target audience. As a result, guided by Global Integrity the coalition set up a strategy anchored by cycles of action and learning and defined 3 additional learning questions that will help understand even more the impact of the adaptations.

Phase two learning questions

1. To what extent can videos be a starting point for the audience to get more engaged and spark interest in joining social movements to demand accountability and how might we harness people's interest to push for mobilization?

2. How can these types of initiatives help strengthen the relationships with activists on the ground and help find more allies for the work on kleptocracy?

How did the adaptations play out in practice?

Communications Strategy

The partners agreed that bringing on a social media consultant was extremely helpful in designing and executing the communications strategy, and with her help, we were able to design professional graphics and plan the launch around the EU-AU summit to gain more traction. The messaging was cohesive regionally but adapted as well for national and international audiences.

While the support from Finance Uncovered helped to mainstream the message across the region and create cohesion between countries, the partners also believed that they could have taken even more advantage of the data provided to create a stronger regional narrative.

Media Consumption

Since we saw more engagement with the trailer for the video series than the actual country-specific videos, the partners also agreed that a "big bang" launch would have been more effective than the soft launch with the subsequent weekly video releases. We also noticed that engagement was limited on Twitter and Youtube, and the videos were more successful on Facebook. The partners agreed that they need to look into other platforms, such as instagram and tiktok, to widen the reach of the message and meet people where they are.

Partners also noted that the impact of the video series may not be immediate, and that the videos can be recycled for future use in other campaigns or simply take some time to gain traction.

Target Audience

In working on the videos, coalition partners were able to engage with the target audiences (for example, women's groups in Congo-Brazzaville) and strengthen their partnerships with local actors working on the country-specific issues.

However, it is unclear from the metrics we have whether or not the videos themselves were successful in reaching the target audience of women and youth.

Helping audiences be more engaged and spark interest in joining social movements

According to our partners, videos like the ones produced by the coalition are an important tool to counter-programme in a more local voice the general misinformation by official media. This campaign has encouraged citizens to speak up, as it was the case in Congo-Brazzaville during an in-person event or in Equatorial Guinea where people are sharing photos and videos of unfair situations in Whatsapp groups. The video campaign is contributing to a larger space of discourse, and while not one specific video is not the sole triggering element, its contribution is important for plowing the path.

According to our partners, great progress was made during the implementation of the second phase by working more closely with in-country activities. It was one of the biggest barriers the organizations had faced in tackling kleptocracy at the ground level. The progress made was a result of both having brave activists willing to talk about the issue and do work around it, but also by having the coalition members explicitly discuss security issues and how to navigate them. It also added another layer of advocacy.

Takeaways for the third phase

Security
Despite the progress made with activists on the ground talking and starting to work around kleptocracy issues, authorities are still harassing them. For our next phase as we aim to expand the collaboration and engagement at the country level, security protocols should be addressed and incorporated into any activity planned. Coupled with partnerships with lawyers and human rights defenders groups that can support and provide some protection in case there are incidents that put at risk the activists or leaders we would be working with.

Communications
For the future, we need to think of more creative ways to tie the different stories together. It would also help to have more local voices that would ground the narrative in citizens' everyday lives.

Media strategy
From the limited engagement with international media in both phases and despite some progress with the video campaign, we learned that for future phases we need to take more time to engage with and build relationships with the big media houses and pitch our ideas to them.

Audience
In the future, we will have to do more research on the best platforms to reach these groups, as well as engaging influencers or activists with large followings to help spread the message.