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Focusing efforts and blurring lines: the OECD's shift from ethics to integrity

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Sofia Wickberg

Since corruption became established as a global public problem, the attention of academics as well as NGO experts and officials from international organisations has moved from exploring “why it is a problem” to debating “what works and what does not” in combating it. Faced with the seeming failure of anti-corruption policies and consistently high levels of public distrust, many players in the field have reassessed their approach. In the mid-2010s, the OECD considered it “timely” to update its approach to preventing corruption, leading to its new 2017

Recommendation on Public Integrity

(<https://www.oecd.org/gov/ethics/recommendation-public-integrity/>), replacing the 1998 OECD *Recommendation on Improving Ethical Conduct in the Public Service* (<https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/129>).

The OECD's move from ethics to integrity is not radical, as many elements of the new recommendation were implicit in its existing work on ethics. It does, however, reflect a shift, introducing the individual into the equation, and marks the organisation's ambition to move outside its comfort zone and engage new audiences in its “whole-of-society” approach. This blog presents the main dimensions of this transition to integrity and suggests some elements to elucidate the shift.

From an ethics infrastructure to an integrity system: a post-NPM world?

Between 1998 and 2017, the OECD's recommendation moved from promoting an ethical infrastructure to recognising the role of a comprehensive integrity system, echoing a semantic shift that started in the 2000s and accelerated in the 2010s. Sometimes seen primarily as symbolic^[1], the move from ‘ethical infrastructure’ to ‘integrity system’ nevertheless marks an evolution away from anti-corruption being

promoted through pre-determined policies. This metaphorical dimension merits attention: 'infrastructure' alludes to the rigidity of toolkits whereas 'system' suggests more flexibility and consideration for local contexts [2].

In the words of OECD officials, the new recommendation symbolises the organisation's move from ethics management to good governance. As the emergence of ethics in the 1990s is described as a consequence of New Public Management (NPM) reforms – 'more freedom [requiring] a different type of soft control'[3] – the shift to integrity seems to mark the OECD's ambition to move beyond the discourse of efficiency in order to create a more positive narrative about government.

Focusing efforts and reducing the costs of anti-corruption

With the 2017 recommendation, corruption prevention is more explicitly framed as a question of risk analysis, suggesting a consideration for the costs of *anti*-corruption, moving beyond the traditional discourse on the costs of corruption.

After three decades of anti-corruption efforts and a major economic crisis, policy actors realised that preventing misconduct came at an organisational and financial cost, whilst the results of these policies were slow to materialise. To safeguard the policy field, the language of cost-benefit analysis became increasingly popular in the 2000s and came with the idea that anti-corruption efforts should be focussed on high-risk areas, organisations and sectors.

As risk management became central to the internal control community and made its way from the corporate sector into government in the 2000s, there was a parallel "riskification (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0305829811419444?journalCode=mila>)" of the OECD's policy work, with the launch of its Risk Forum in 2013 and the increased focus on risk governance. The notion of risk and risk management techniques have since spread to inspire large segments of the OECD's work.

"Doing the right thing, even when nobody is watching"

Compliance is costly, thus another consequence of the need to focus resources is the emphasis on values over compliance, which was made explicit in the new recommendation through references to cultural change and behavioural approaches.

Resonating with recent academic work

(https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137427649_6), the OECD is increasingly focussing its attention on the intrinsic motivations of public officials, beyond control and compliance. Much as corruption is increasingly understood as going beyond just illegality, integrity here means more than merely not violating rules. With a Foucauldian perspective, such a values-based approach starts shifting responsibility from the regulator to each individual, assuming an internalisation of the rules, an understanding of the consequences of one's actions as well as greater trust in public officials to regulate themselves.

The OECD's shift to a pro-integrity approach was accelerated by the organisation's encounter with cognitive science and "nudging" techniques in the mid 2010s, reflecting a wider global trend exemplified by Richard H. Thaler's Nobel Prize and the 2015 World Development Report. In 2015, the OECD Public Sector Integrity division hired a behavioural science specialist to further the organisation's application of behavioural science to public integrity, which resulted in the publication of *Behavioural Insights for Public Integrity* (https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/behavioural-insights-for-public-integrity_9789264297067-en#page1) in 2018.

OECD officials describe this as the pendulum swinging back: after having spent two decades advocating for an institutional approach to corruption over the "bad apple" perspective, it is time to refocus the work of the organisation on the individual[4].

Whole-of-government to whole-of-society: bringing everyone on board

OECD officials see its whole-of-society approach as the major change brought forth by the shift to integrity[5]. In the development of the new recommendation, the initial step was to move out of the OECD's comfort zone of central public administration to talk about a whole-of-government approach, including all

branches of power as well as subnational government. The final product after various waves of consultation is even broader, promoting a whole-of-society approach.

The whole-of-society approach epitomises both the OECD's reflections on its identity and future role on the international stage, and also the Public Sector Integrity team's ambition to move beyond the "traditional corruption fighters" and engage less familiar social groups, such as education professionals.

But this broadened scope of action also echoes the increasingly blurred lines between the different spheres of society deriving from NPM reforms, focussing less on (public) institutions and more on organisations. By recommending that governments partner with the private sector, civil society and individuals to promote a culture of integrity, it attributes a transactional dimension to corruption and covers all its players. After shifting responsibility for compliance from organisations to individuals, the OECD further alters its theory of change by making society as a whole responsible for the public integrity system.

Conclusion

The OECD's shift to integrity is symptomatic of a wider change in the anti-corruption community, which – after years of promoting control and sanction – is growing weary of assertions that these approaches have failed. Anti-corruption discourse has always waved the red flag of public distrust and democratic crisis, without seeing much change. Slowly digging the grave of the public choice perspective on corruption, the OECD is now shining a more positive light on government officials, as the organisation tries to position itself as the thought leader of the community.

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[1] OECD Official. Interview, 3 April 2017

[2] The move should however be nuanced as a toolbox is being developed, at OECD governments demand, to accompany the new recommendation (OECD Officials. Interviews. April 3rd 2017 and May 23d 2018)

[3] OECD Officials. Interviews, 23 May 2018

[4] OECD Public Sector Integrity Officials. Interview, 23 May 2018

[5] OECD Officials. Interviews, 3 April 2017 and 23 May 2018

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