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The efficacy of utilitarianism philosophy in addressing the problem of corruption in developing economies

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Abstract

Corruption is a pervasive issue in developing economies, undermining economic growth, social development and governance. Utilitarianism, a moral theory that emphasizes the greatest good for the greatest number, offers a framework for addressing corruption by focusing on the consequences of actions and rule based issues. This article explores the efficacy of utilitarianism in combating corruption in developing economies. By analysing the ethical implications of utilitarian principles in the context of corruption, policymakers and stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to promote transparency, accountability and integrity in governance. There are rule-based utilitarianism and act-based utilitarianism which can be used in dealing with corruption.

Keywords: Corruption; Utilitarianism philosophy; Developing economies; Pay It Forward; Ubuntu

1. Introduction

"Corruption deepens poverty; it debases human rights; it degrades the environment; it derails development, including private sector development; it can drive conflict in and between nations; and it destroys confidence in democracy and legitimacy of governments. It debases human dignity and is universally condemned by the world's major faiths", Transparency International (1999) cited in (Hess and Dunfee, 2000:594). The main objective of this article is to articulate the efficacy of utilitarianism philosophy in remedying the problem of corruption in developing economies. For the avoidance of ambiguity, the writers will explain the following key terms namely corruption and ethics of utilitarianism as used in this context.

2. Conceptualization of corruption

The word "corruption" has roots in the Latin adjective "corruptus" which means spoiled, broken or destroyed (Hodgson and Jiang, 2007). Corruption is a ubiquitous phenomenon in that it has presence in every nation (Vorster, 2013). What might vary is the spread and depth of corruption across the countries. Several definitions of the term corruption have evolved over the years. Klitgaard (1988) posits that corruption is the betrayal of the principal's interest by an agent in pursuit of his or her own interest. In fact, Klitgaard (1988) sums up corruption (C) as monopoly power (M) plus discretion by officials (D) less accountability (A) which is presented in a mathematical expression as:

$$C = M + D - A$$

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Leys (1965) avers that corruption is behaviour that breaks some rules, written or unwritten regarding the purpose to which a public office has been put. This definition portrays a narrow view of corruption by confining it to the public sector as if corruption does not exist in the private sector. AusAid (2003) gives a concise definition of corruption as the misuse of entrusted power for private or personal gain. Ejue and Madubueze (2014) defines corruption as the absence of accountability, transparency and civic engagement. The last definition relates to the public sector too as it makes reference to civic engagement. Thus, it has the same limitation as the one by Leys (1965). The term corruption is very difficult to define. The reality however, is that whether or not corruption can be ethically justified is not only determined by one's definition of corruption, but it is substantially defined by the ethical standard by which one is judging the behaviour (Jones, 2013). From the above definitions, it is clear that corruption has emphasis on personal interest as opposed to public interest. It can be seen from the various definitions of corruption presented above that corruption is selfish, dishonest and deprives the majority of the people of their deserved benefits such as social, economic and political benefits. Corruption corrodes the moral fabric of society (Vorster, 2012). It is thus, important to add voice on alternative means of addressing the problem of corruption through the ethics of utilitarianism to create a conducive environment for doing business in developing economies such as Zimbabwe.

2.1. Addressing corruption through the utilitarian lens

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory of ethics which posits that actions are morally right to the extent that they tend to promote the greatest good for the greatest number. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist approach which is results based. The basic utilitarianism view is that an action is judged as right or good on the basis of its consequences (Kay, 2016). Utilitarianism is a result of an evolutionary process. It falls under teleological ethical theories. The term teleology refers to the study of results. It is based on the utilitarian principle which holds that one should act to promote the greatest good (happiness) for the greatest number. Essentially the utilitarian credo may be expressed as "the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, utility, or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (Mill, 2009:14). Utilitarianism does not judge morality based on a set of predetermined standards. There are no predetermined rights and wrongs. According to utilitarians, actions are right when they maximise the best for the greatest number of people and actions are wrong when they cause more pain than pleasure for the greatest number of people (Weiss, 2014; Vorster, 2012). Using the utilitarian model one would argue that corruption is good when it maximises the independent pleasure of the greatest number of people and that it is not good when it creates pain for the majority. Thus, from a utilitarian point of view the results of corrupt behaviour are determinative of whether or not corruption could be ethically permissible. For instance, the act of embezzlement of funds by a public official can create great pleasure for a single family. However, if many more families experience great pain due to the embezzlement, then the act of corruption through embezzlement would be ethically wrong in terms of the utilitarian model.

2.2. Solving corruption through rule-based utilitarianism

Utilitarianists use two types of criteria in deciding the greatest benefit to be achieved from acting in a certain way and in analysing a particular action or behaviour to determine whether the greatest utility or good can be achieved. These are the rule-based utilitarianism and act-based utilitarianism (Weiss, 2014). It is crucial to point out that both act utilitarians and rule utilitarians agree that the overall goal in evaluating actions is to create the best results possible but they differ about how to do that. Rule utilitarians employ a two-part view that emphasises the importance of moral rules. According to rule utilitarians, a particular action is morally justified if it conforms to a justified moral rule and a moral rule is justified if its inclusion into an organisation's moral code would create more utility than other possible rules. Thus, in terms of the rule utilitarianism perspective one should judge the morality of individual actions by reference to the general moral rules. It follows that one should judge specific moral rules by observing whether their acceptance into moral codes would produce more well-being than other possible rules. Act utilitarians hold the view that whenever one is deciding what to do, one should perform the action that will create the greatest net utility. In the view of the act utilitarians the principle of utility should be applied on a case by case basis. In a nutshell, the key difference between act and rule utilitarianism is that act utilitarians apply the utilitarian principle directly to the evaluation of individual actions while rule utilitarians apply the utilitarian principle directly to the evaluation of rules and then evaluate individual actions by checking if they obey or disobey those rules whose acceptance will produce the most utility. The writers maintain that it is possible to remedy the problem of corruption in any developing economy such as Zimbabwe using the ethics of utilitarianism.

2.3. Dealing with corruption using act-based utilitarianism

Act based utilitarianism may be used to minimise the occurrence and impact of corruption in any country. Napal (2006) posits that most decision makers rely on the notions of consequences when faced with ethical dilemmas. That is, when faced with ethical choices, the decision maker must opt for the act or decision that yields maximum utility or least harm.

In essence, act utilitarianism provides an objective basis for moral decision making. Through Bentham's hedonistic calculus, ethical decision makers can quantify pleasure and pain and doing so would assist decision makers to choose those actions which are morally worthy. Morally worth actions are those that yield the greatest good and least pain. The realisation that act utilitarianism helps people to make objective ethical decisions demands that institutions, organisations, communities and society should make ethics education a moral imperative. Introducing ethics education in schools and organisations would go a long way in developing cost-benefit-analysis skills which are at the centre of hedonistic calculus. Kurasha (2013) remarks that developing institutions, business entities and government depends on the moral responsibility of human beings. Thus, teaching hedonistic calculus in ethics development programmes in schools and workplaces would develop human beings with a high sense of moral responsibility. Developing morally responsible human beings is key to fighting the scourge of corruption.

2.4. Rule based utilitarianism

Rule based utilitarianism posits that general principles are used as criteria for deciding the greatest benefit to be achieved from acting in a certain way. According to this criteria, it is not the act itself which is the basis for assessing whether the greatest good can be gained but the principles chosen. It holds the view that based on past experience and knowledge one can determine what acts in general produce happiness over unhappiness. Rule utilitarianism can be used to inform public policy in order to combat corrupt practices. For instance, in His inaugural speech in November 2017, the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, His Excellency Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa announced the policy of zero tolerance to corruption. The announcement was followed by practical steps to operationalise the new policy. With the coming in of the new political order in the country, the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) has introduced the requirement that senior government officials such as Permanent Secretaries, Chief Executive Officers of State Enterprises and Parastatals and Cabinet Ministers to declare their assets upon assuming duty as a public servant (Maodza, 2018). Such a policy would help minimise high profile corruption cases among the senior public officers. It is clear from the above illustration that the ethics of rule utilitarianism can be used to remedy the problem of corruption in Zimbabwe.

The Government of Zimbabwe is implementing a raft of policy reforms aimed at cutting red tape. There is a high correlation between the incidence of corruption and the extent of bureaucratic red tape. The government is working on improving the ease of doing business in the country and the effort to do so has been amplified with the coming in of the new political dispensation in November 2017. The policy reforms are meant to create a new order of doing business the ethical way where individual interests are subordinated to majority interests. Red tape coupled with a lowly paid civil service is fertile ground for breeding corruption. Thus, a government can reduce corrupt practices by putting in place a sound remuneration policy for the civil servants such that civil servants get paid well. Empirical evidence indicates that there is an inverse relationship between the level of public sector wages and the incidence of corruption (Van Rijokeghem and Weder, 2001). The policy of paying civil servants well will minimise corruption as they will be able to meet their basic needs from their salaries.

2.5. Examples of corruption

Much of the corruption taking place in developing economies such as involving astronomical amounts of money is occurring in government departments and quasi-government institutions such as State Owned Enterprises and Parastatals. Most of the corruption cases have been linked to weak corporate governance in the organisations. For instance, the salary gate scandals that rocked the Harare City Council top management and former Premier Medical Aid Society top executives. The writers argue that good corporate governance requires ethical decision making capacity. Thus, it is not possible to isolate corporate governance issues from business ethics. Consequently, the Government of Zimbabwe has put in place the Public Entities Corporate Governance Act (Chapter 10:31). This piece of legislation has redefined and aligned corporate governance with regional and international best practices. It is crucial to note that making reference to the laws of a country such as the Public Entities Corporate Governance Act in a philosophical discussion of this nature does not subordinate the superiority of ethics to the law. Such reference is meant to demonstrate the application of rule utilitarianism as the law is viewed as a rule in this case.

Public procurement and disposal of public assets is another area where corruption is generally rife. As a result of public officers with corrupt behaviours, projects costs have been inflated causing the government or state owned enterprises to lose money which could have been invested into other projects for the benefit of many people. Upon realising the inherent weaknesses in the former State Procurement Board Act, the government of Zimbabwe developed the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Act (Chapter 22:23) which outlines the procurement and disposal procedures to be followed by public officials to reduce corrupt behaviours. The Act brought into existence the Public Procurement Authority of Zimbabwe (PRAZ) which effectively replaced the State Procurement Board. Implementing

these policies, and rules properly will result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Thus, the ethics of utilitarianism can be used to remedy the problem of corruption in developing economies such as Zimbabwe.

Another example of corruption is a public officer who issues a licence, accepts a gift or bribe. Issuing the licence is his or her job for which he or she earns his salary. He or she is not doing anyone a favour, but a gift for doing official work only whets his appetite and promotes self-interest. Unless continuous pressure is maintained and we have a good honest people in governance, corruption will reappear in more sophisticated ways than ever (Khera, 2005). Corruption takes roots from birth. Bribing the authorities to get a birth certificate or falsifying them is the first exposure to dishonest in society. By the time the child is an adult, he or she has seen and practised enough of it. The child has habitually learnt to live without moral conscience (Khera, 2005).

2.6. Reducing corruption

Hong Kong, once seen as one of the most corrupt nations in the world was able to significantly reduce corruption using anti-corruption strategies that were underpinned by the ethics of utilitarianism. It adopted a three pronged strategy in the fight against corruption which was anchored on the following three pillars: deterrence, prevention and education (Man-wai, 2006). The writers opine that the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) could also use the three pronged strategy to deal with the problem of corruption. The deterrence strategy entails putting in place a zero tolerance to corruption and coming up with a policy which promotes full investigation of all reports of corruption made. Minor and serious cases of corruption alike should be investigated fully. The anti-corruption body can establish an effective public complaint system to encourage reporting of corruption by members of the public as well as making public all successful enforcement efforts to demonstrate effectiveness and to deter the corrupt.

The Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission can employ the corruption prevention strategy to reduce the corruption opportunities in government departments, public and private institutions through enhanced system control, enhanced staff integrity, streamlined procedures, promotion of efficiency, transparency and accountability and promotion of staff code of ethics. Effective implementation of these preventive rules, policies and procedures leads to the attainment of the greatest good for the greatest number of people which is essentially the principle of utilitarianism.

The education strategy can be used to enlist the support of the entire community in a partnership to fight corruption. The education strategies include: media publicity through press releases, media conferences and interviews to publicise successfully enforced cases; media education, which entails using mass media commercials to encourage the public to report corruption, promote public awareness of the evils of corruption and the need for a fair and just society as a deterrence to corruption. The education strategy should include the introduction of ethics education programmes from early childhood to university level. The anti-corruption body can make use of corruption prevention talks and ethics development seminars for public servants and the business sector. Establishment of an Ethics Development Centre as a resource centre for the promotion of a staff code of ethics in partnership with the business sector as well as the issuance of corruption prevention best practices and guidelines are some of the education strategies that could be used by the anti-corruption body.

2.7. Pay it forward Concept

It is the practice of doing good to others, who in turn do the same to others . To an extent that it becomes a culture. In a cultural exchange programme an employee from a certain organisation went to South Korea, where he witnessed a highest degree of honesty. People do not count their change they believe in each other and believe that the money is the right amount.

2.8. Ubuntu

Ubuntu is an African principle and strategy that shows that a person is a person through other people. 'I am because, you are, because we are'. It is an African philosophy centred on humanity, interconnectedness, compassion, community engagement, communal well-being. Ubuntu is the essence of being human thereby bringing the aspect of humanity. Ubuntu is called for, which also forms part of the utilitarianism.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

The writers have explained the notion of utilitarianism, including the concepts of act based and rule based utilitarianism and how they could be used as a remedy to the problem of corruption in developing economies such as Zimbabwe. The successful combating of corruption presupposes a moral community that is, a community of people who in most cases try to do what is morally right and to avoid doing what is wrong. Consequently, any efforts to combat corruption should

be anchored on a moral renewal programme whose focus should be on the education and activation of the conscience of every individual. It was thus, justified that the ethics of utilitarianism can be used to remedy the problem of corruption in developing economies around the globe.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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