

Moving ‘from political won’t to political will’ for more feasible interventions to tackle serious organised crime and corruption

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Summary

This briefing note looks at the links between (lack of) political will and serious organised crime (SOC) and corruption. It suggests a new way to better understand political will and why a ‘lack of political will’ may appear to exist. The lens of *political want*, *political can* and *political must* introduced here, based on Malena’s (2009) work on ‘getting from political won’t to political will’, can help those tasked with developing counter-SOC and anti-corruption strategies and interventions to move beyond seeing political will as a barrier, in order to better develop more *politically* and *technically feasible* reforms and approaches. This note adapts this framework and suggests an approach individuals and teams can use in their day-to-day work to trigger new ways of thinking about the challenge and to suggest potential ways to ‘unlock’ political will for reforms.

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Background

'Lack of political will' has been described as a key factor undermining efforts to tackle SOC and corruption.⁴ The UK's Serious and Organised Crime Strategy, for example, sets out the intention to 'drive up political will to address vulnerabilities in jurisdictions of risk, enhancing resilience and strengthening operational cooperation'.⁵ Scheye stresses the importance of political will in countries where organised crime is rampant: 'If little to no political will and commitment exist, it is naïve and foolhardy to believe that activities sponsored and supported by both domestic and international actors can not only succeed but also be sustained'.⁶ The Council on Foreign Relations concluded, 'when political leaders or elites benefit from organized crime, implementation of international frameworks is not feasible'.⁷

Political will is a term used frequently in the context of government action and policy outcomes, though most often a *lack* of political will is cited to explain policy or reform failure. As I have written elsewhere: 'Political will has become a global shorthand for explaining why reforms succeed or fail. The phrase "we can't do anything here because there's no political will" has become like a resigned shrug to end a difficult conversation'.⁸ Malena echoes this, encouraging us to move beyond simply assessing whether or not political will exists and then 'shrugging our shoulders in resignation

if that is not the case'.⁹ Instead, she argues that 'the presence or absence of political will is not an external factor we must passively accept, but rather something we must actively seek to create and nurture'.¹⁰

Brinkerhoff defines political will as: 'the commitment of (a defined set of) actors to undertake actions to achieve a set of (distinct) objectives...and to sustain the costs of those actions over time'. These costs might be political, such as the loss of public support or through peer disapproval, and they may be about opportunity costs, such as prioritising something over multiple other potential and/or competing political, policy or legislative priorities. This involves moving beyond thinking about political will as something that comes down to actions (or non-actions) by individuals but rather about leadership as inherently contextual and collective. As Hudson et al argue:

No individual leader is an island, and no one can usher change by themselves. Reform is rarely the product of the action of politicians on their own, but instead relies on strategic alliances, policy networks, and advocacy...In the real world, change hinges on the complex relationships between individuals and their institutional context. Moreover, agents are embedded in institutions; they can individually or collectively work within the existing institutional framework, to disrupt, evade or re-write them, but they are also constrained and empowered by them.¹¹

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- 4 For a detailed review of the literature on SOC and political will, see Idris, I (2022). *Political will and combatting serious organised crime*. SOC ACE Evidence Review Report 1. Birmingham: SOC ACE.
- 5 HMG (2018). *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy*. London: HMG, p. 80. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/752850/SOC-2018-web.pdf.
- 6 Scheye, E (2020). *Measuring political will in an organised crime environment*. ENACT (Enhancing Africa's Response to Transnational Organised Crime), p. 2. <https://enactafrica.org/research/research-papers/measuring-political-will-in-an-organised-crime-environment>.
- 7 Council on Foreign Relations (2013). *The Global Regime for Transnational Crime*, 25 June. <https://www.cfr.org/report/global-regime-transnational-crime>.
- 8 Marquette, H (2020). 'Targeting corruption in environmental crime and natural resource governance: How can *Thinking and Working Politically* help to unlock political will?' Targeting Natural Resource Corruption (TNRC) Blog, March. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/tnrc-blog-thinking-and-working-politically>.
- 9 Malena, C (2009). 'Building political will for participatory governance: An introduction' in Malena, C. (ed.) *From Political Won't to Political Will: Building support for participatory governance*. London: Eurospan, p. 19.
- 10 Malena (2009). p. 19.
- 11 Hudson, D, Mcloughlin, C, Marquette, H & Roche, C (2018). *Inside the black box of political will: 10 years of findings from the Development Leadership Program*. Birmingham: DLP, p. 8. <https://www.dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/inside-the-black-box-of-political-will-10-years-of-findings-from-the-developmental-leadership-program>; see also Zalmanovitch, Y & Cohen, N (2015). 'The pursuit of political will: politicians' motivation and health promotion'. *The International Journal of Health Planning and Management*, 30(1), p. 35.

Political will isn't something that individual actors can simply turn on or off, and it has to be understood within its own particular context and with a pragmatic eye on what is both politically *and* technically feasible at any given time. Persson and Sjöstedt explain that lack of political will, including 'unfulfilled reform promises', may not be 'best understood as a result of particularly malevolent leaders, but as a rational – and in some circumstances in fact even the only possible – response to the conditions under which they govern'.¹² This isn't to let powerful actors off the hook for deliberate inaction and/or sabotage, but simply to ensure we understand their capacity and available resources, as well as 'the pressures they face from others and the rules within which they have to work'.¹³

This short note aims to help fill a gap between what research tells us about political will, including in particular contexts, and the sorts of everyday judgements that reformers – whether domestic or external, state or non-state – need to make when faced with what looks like lack of political will to tackle SOC and corruption. It introduces a simplified way to think about moving 'from political won't to political will', including a set of hypothetical examples to demonstrate how the approach could work in practice. While the primary audiences for this note are those working in policy or practitioner settings, it also aims to provide researchers and other analysts with a shorthand way to test recommendations for policy and practice audiences before publishing, in order to highlight where these may need to be reworked in order to be more politically – and often also, technically – feasible.

A simplified way to think about moving 'from political won't to political will'

In 2009, Civicus published a book called *From Political Won't to Political Will: Building support for participatory governance* bringing together a range of case studies across different country and sector contexts where reformers overcame a lack of political will, often against the odds. Looking across these, Malena (the book's editor) identified some commonalities across contexts and set out a way to better understand why political will might not exist, beyond often simplistic presumptions about individual actors' motivations.

This section provides a summary of Malena's framework which provides a useful lens through which to better understand political will and to assess why there may or may not seem to be political will, whether for particular reforms or to support particular strategies or tactics. After setting out the overarching framework, there is then a set of questions that reflect the highly challenging nature of counter-SOC and anti-corruption reforms, where actors often face threats of violence that other governance reformers may not have to worry about. This is followed by two hypothetical examples to demonstrate how this approach can help with triggering alternative thinking about why there may be lack of political will for certain things in order to identify alternatives that may be more politically *and* technically feasible.

12 Persson, A & Sjöstedt, M (2012). 'Responsive and Responsible Leaders: A Matter of Political Will?' *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(3), p. 624.

13 Hudson, D, Marquette, H & Waldock, S (2016). *Everyday Political Analysis*. Birmingham: DLP, p. 1.

Assessing (lack of) political will in context: political want, political can, and political must

Malena¹⁴ suggests that we need to understand '(lack of) political will' differently, in a way that can be summed up as a simple formula:

**Political will =
(political want + political can + political must)**

In other words, for power holders to commit to and act in favour of a certain cause they need 'to *want* to undertake a given action, feel confident that they *can* undertake that action and feel that they *must* undertake that action'.¹⁵ Breaking this down further:

- *Political want*: Ideally, power holders would not have to be forced to do things that benefit citizens. In the absence of 'natural champions', evidence shows that it is possible to 'convert' champions by setting out arguments for reforms in ways that align with power holders' political and personal self-interest, if not their personal beliefs and values.
- *Political can*: Power holders need to be confident in their own and others' (for example, civil society, private sector, and other relevant state actors) 'abilities, skills, mechanisms, resources and support', including key things such as having the right legal and regulatory frameworks in place.¹⁶ Without this confidence in their own capacity, or the capacity of others, even reformers who *want* to make changes may feel unable to do so. Indeed, as Brinkerhoff argues, 'what may look to outsiders like a

lack of political will can be linked instead to insufficient capacity'.¹⁷

- *Political must*: As Malena reminds us: 'Politics is an arena of stiff and constant competition for limited attention, time and resources. Even if a political leader or bureaucrat genuinely *wants* to undertake action and has the capacity to do so, the chance of action actually occurring is much greater if this *want* and *can* are accompanied by some compelling force or pressure that demands action and renders inaction politically costly'.¹⁸ This pressure could come from above or from below, or from other reforms or new sanctions, for example, but it remains important to see any suggested action – no matter how important – in this wider political context of constant competing demands.

In each of these, there are also four key factors that influence political *want*, *can* and *must*:¹⁹

- *individual*: personal interests, incentives and ideas, beliefs and values;
- *organisational*: the existence of an organisational mandate, culture that rewards the change, established practices and procedures, the right incentives;
- *relational*: connections and relationships between key stakeholders, state-society relations, existence of trust; and
- *societal*: political, legal, socioeconomic, historical and cultural characteristics including, for example, whether or not power is held by political 'cronies'; whether or not there are high rates of poverty, illiteracy, social capital and political or social trust; and whether or not there are significant gender, class, regional or other inequities.

14 Malena (2009). pp. 19-25.

15 Malena (2009). p. 19.

16 Malena (2009). p. 2.

17 Brinkerhoff, D (2010). *Unpacking the concept of political will to confront corruption*. U4 Brief: 1. <https://www.u4.no/publications/unpacking-the-concept-of-political-will-to-confront-corruption>.

18 Malena (2009). pp. 21-22.

19 Malena (2009). pp. 23-25.

BOX: What do external actors really want when it comes to political will?

While a growing body of evidence suggests we need to develop the more problem-driven, politically feasible strategies and operations on SOC and corruption,²⁰ what this means for external actors is rarely clear. External actors may be concerned about political will because they want to develop responses that reflect contextual realities on the ground and are politically feasible within that context, while others may be looking for more political influence to convince or pressure local counterparts to focus on their own priorities. Evidence from other sectors suggests that regardless of the motivation of external actors, they may need to consider appropriate compromises, especially in the short term, including what this means in specific geographic or sector contexts and how to assess this for more effective responses in the short *and* longer terms with fewer potential unintended consequences.²¹ In other words, just because there may not be political will to do x right now, there may be to do y; do we know what y is and how can we judge whether or not y is 'good enough' (for now)?

However, before this assessment takes place, Green suggests that external actors need to first decide whether they want to 'do more' or 'do less'. 'Do more' includes, for example, an extensive menu of tactics such as better coordination of strategic interventions across multiple levels, capacity building, working on the social contract, building coalitions and acting in a convening and brokering role, among other things. 'Do less', on the other hand, sees a more limited available set of tactics that focuses on trying to influence the political settlement and building an enabling environment for endogenous change.²² I would add that in making this decision external actors must also undertake an honest and realistic assessment of their *own* 'political want, political can, and political must' in the face of what will always be challenging work with uncertain outcomes in a world with multiple competing demands for time and resources.

Questions to consider when thinking about *political want, political can and political must*

What follows is *not* a new framework. Instead, there are a short series of potential questions that readers can use as a simple mental shorthand to help think through whether strategies, tactics, policy or research recommendations, demands from reformers (including, but not limited to, external actors) and so on are both politically *and* technically feasible. In keeping with growing evidence on more effective anti-corruption

approaches,²³ while these can be applied to political will in a general sense, they are likely to work best when thinking about *specific* problems within a specific time frame, whether the latter is bounded by urgency due to threat or a potential window of opportunity, by political cycles (such as before an election) or budget cycles, and so on.

These are suggestions to get started with and are not intended to be comprehensive, applicable across every potential scenario in every possible context. However, they should help trigger new conversations and ways of thinking about the challenges of tackling SOC and corruption and what kind of support may be needed to nurture political will or, just as importantly, where support may not be possible what alternatives may need to be considered instead.

20 Marquette, H & Peiffer, C (2021). 'Corruption and Transnational Organised Crime' in Allum, F. & Gilmour, S. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*. London: Routledge, pp. 467-487.

21 Marquette & Peiffer (2021).

22 Green, D (2017). *Theories of change for promoting empowerment and accountability in fragile and conflict-affected settings*. A4EA/IDS Working Paper 499. Brighton: IDS, pp. 43-49.

23 Marquette & Peiffer (2021).

Political want:

- Is there committed political leadership demonstrating over time that they are willing to commit to reforms to tackle SOC and/or corruption? If so, are they isolated or are there 'like-minded' individuals or groups that they can work with?
- Will proposed changes lead to power holders losing power? Are the consequences of losing power likely to be high (for example, losing their position, losing access to resources needed to keep patronage networks in place, losing access to funding for political parties, becoming more vulnerable to challengers, or physical harm)?
- Will individual champions face potential retribution for supporting the desired change, including violence directed against them (or their families)? Is there a history of previous champions facing retribution, violent or otherwise? What (realistic) reassurances could be offered to potential natural champions who may be reluctant because of potential consequences?
- Could the proposed change risk greater instability, including violence, in general? Is the suggested change sensitive to potential conflict dynamics?
- Do the expected benefits from a proposed reform outweigh any potential costs for power holders? Are there ways to better articulate the cost-benefit analysis that focus on individual power holders, rather than focusing solely on collective or societal benefits when framing the issues? Are there any adaptations that could be made to help make the benefits outweigh the costs; for instance, by acting, will individual champions increase or decrease their standing within their most valued networks?
- Do organisational incentives and reward systems align with the proposed change? Are there *feasible* ways to (re) align these in a timely way in order to support the proposed change?

- Is there existing evidence of broad-based public support for changes being sought? Are there (realistic) opportunities to build this?
- Is the demand for the proposed change coming largely, or solely, from external actors? Are there ways in which external actors can better link up with domestic reformers to build broader public support?

Political can:

- Are there legal, regulatory and policy frameworks in place that are designed to support action and to prevent inaction on the part of power holders? If so, do these function properly, or are they at risk of providing "window dressing" without sanctions for inaction and/or sabotage?
- Do *all necessary actors* have the capacity to implement and sustain the desired change: the necessary financial resources to deliver the change, the ability to set objectives, coordinate action, work effectively, implement programmes, manage organisations and staff, monitor resources, develop strategy, monitor progress and so on?²⁴ Can capacity (realistically) be built within the necessary time frame?
- If relevant actors lack the necessary knowledge and skills, is it possible to build this without exposing any weaknesses and so allowing them to save face (if the latter is likely to be important to them in a particular context)?
- Do members of the public, including civil society, have sufficient knowledge and capacity to support power holders, particularly those that may lack this knowledge and capacity themselves?
- Is there sufficient information in the public domain, including independent data and research that the public and civil society can access and use?

²⁴ Brinkerhoff (2010). p. 3.

- Does the necessary enabling legal framework exist to enable the desired change? If not, are there *feasible* ways to put this in place given the time frame and competing political and/or legislative priorities?
 - Do other necessary institutional mechanisms exist? If so, are these functioning at a standard necessary for supporting the desired change? If not, are there *feasible* ways to strengthen these?
 - Are there sufficient resources overall to make the desired change *technically* feasible, if there does seem to be political will (or a way to nurture it), including (but not limited to) law enforcement and investigation? Can resources (realistically) be made available, and can these be sustained over time?
 - Do criminal or corrupt actors have the capacity to undermine attempts to bolster *political can*, such as raising the costs for reform or change? Are they able to adapt quickly enough that assessments of *political can* will need to be reassessed sooner rather than later?
 - If the political opposition is opposing a reform, possibly as a way to score points for themselves, could they raise the price of a reform so high as to make it unfeasible to pursue?
- Political must:**
- Is there consensus that organised crime and/or corruption pose a significant threat to power holders if they don't clamp down on SOC or corruption, either as individuals, as a group of elites or in terms of the collective good (rule of law, national security, country reputation, investment climate and so on)?
 - Could changes in framing around locally salient ideas shift the way power holders *have to* respond to the threat?
 - Have power holders proven that they are motivated by a sense of obligation or duty for acting in the public interest? Have they shown that they're open to listening to demands from citizens and other key stakeholders, demonstrated over time?
 - Have power holders proven that they tend to listen to demands from citizens and other key stakeholders, demonstrated over time? If not, do they instead demonstrate autocratic or technocratic tendencies, such as a mindset of 'I/we know best' or a refusal to engage with civil society or citizens?
 - Do power holders' public commitments for action typically create an expectation of that action?
 - Are citizens engaged and organised in order to put pressure on power holders from below? Is there pressure from above (such as political pressure on organisations) or from peers? Are there any windows of opportunity to help build and/or support *internal* sources of pressure?
 - Is the main source of pressure, if any, external? What makes the external pressure an important factor in this instance?

How to use this approach in practice

This approach is intended to be as simple and as flexible as possible, as part of formal processes (for teams designing counter-SOC or anti-corruption strategies and operations) or as part of informal ones (for teams to use in brainstorming discussions or when consulting experts). When combined with evidence, including academic or policy research and intelligence (where relevant), it can also help teams better manage discussions with their senior decision makers about why alternative approaches may need to be considered.

In order to illustrate what this may look like at its most basic level, this section provides two hypothetical scenarios based on a real-life policy analysis process. In each of these, the cases involve **an external actor (Country A) wanting to secure commitments from counterparts in another country (Country B)**, highlighting the sorts of interactions often seen between different types of actors in strategic discussions and around specific interventions.

In each case, Country A (the external actor) has identified significant threats to its own national security due to high levels of transnational organised crime in Country B. Country A would like Country B to undertake specific actions and is willing to support these where necessary through, for example, technical assistance, capacity building and mutual intelligence sharing. In both hypothetical cases, the external actor, Country A, is struggling to find the political will in Country B to deliver what it wants, and the examples demonstrate – albeit briefly – how application of the *political want*, *political can* and *political must* lens could help in terms of better understanding challenges for political will and for triggering alternative thinking.

Hypothetical 1: Securing commitment to share intelligence on SOC threats

Country A has identified significant national security threats emerging from illicit trafficking through Country B. Despite investing its own resources in trying to build up a clear intelligence picture of the scale and nature of the threat, this is hampered by inability to gather intelligence directly in Country B due to lack of jurisdiction.

Analysis undertaken by Country A sets out a recommendation that Country B should provide intelligence to Country A. Country A has approached Country B about sharing each other's intelligence assessments in order to boost what is known about the threat, but Country B refuses to share its own intelligence assessments despite the fact that that these could provide vital information needed by Country A for more effective operations. In the initial analysis done by Country A, this has been explained as 'lack of political will'. But is it?

In this case, the best starting point is tackling the *political can*: in reality, Country B lacks the necessary legislative framework for facilitating cross-national intelligence sharing. Whether or not there's *political want* to share intelligence is irrelevant, and so the recommendation as stated is a non-starter. What there needs to be instead is an assessment of whether there is political will for legislative reform to enable cross-national intelligence sharing.

Is there political want for this? It is unclear whether there are sufficient incentives for Country B to prioritise this legislation given how many other threats and challenges it faces, domestic and foreign, and its own deteriorating political situation makes the legislative process more fraught overall.

Is there political can for this? There are theoretically sufficient resources for this and strong systems for bringing about legislative changes if politicians can agree on what needs to be done. Country B would not need any additional support to do this.

Is there political must for this? There does not appear to be any internal pressure for legislative change, only external. Even if there was public pressure, the political leadership is increasingly autocratic and so less responsive to citizen engagement overall. While there are concerns about rising crime levels in Country B, there are counter-arguments that some forms of trafficking alleviate domestic pressures (for example, facilitating movement of refugees through Country B and into other countries) or that trafficking provides much needed income to impoverished communities near borders and ports. There are also rumours, though not substantively confirmed, that some politicians benefit directly from illicit trafficking. Politicians are unlikely to rally around a single point as a result, and the risk of opposing any legislation for the purpose of 'point scoring' is high.

Clearly, new legislation to facilitate cross-national intelligence sharing is unlikely to be a priority for Country B and nor would it deliver the *actual* results Country A would like to see (reducing transnational illicit trafficking going through Country B).

Alternative recommendations for Country A could include, for example:

- a) **if Country A continues to see lack of intelligence sharing as the main problem:** finding something that Country B really wants from Country A that could be offered in exchange for this legislation (such as providing more aid for refugees to take some of the financial pressure off Country B's own budgets), or working with other like-minded countries concerned about the security threat to apply pressure on Country B (for example, through multilateral organisations and/or diplomatic missions);
- b) **if Country A instead focuses on the underlying problems:** going back to recommendations from the analysis to identify a potentially more politically and technically feasible approach to invest its own time and resources in and where there's a higher likelihood of achieving desired results; or

- c) **asking trickier questions of Country A's own political want, can and must:** reassessing Country A's own intelligence systems and networks to see if these can be sufficiently strengthened so that Country B's own intelligence isn't as vital for filling gaps.

This hypothetical case is useful for showing why getting *problem identification* right is the primary step in identifying politically and technically feasible strategies and interventions. A better understanding of political will about the wrong problem will not help achieve desired results.

Hypothetical 2: Tackling illicit trafficking at ports in a region fraught with challenges

Country A has identified significant regional security threats emerging from illicit trafficking going through ports in Country B that have a direct impact on Country A's national security as well. Analysis by Country A, backed by extensive research and intelligence, confirms the significant scale of the threat, which includes weapons as well as narcotics, counterfeit goods, human trafficking and so on. Counterparts in Country B share this assessment and see this activity as a threat to its own national security, even if it is clear that several of Country B's own political and business elites are colluding with traffickers. More specifically, Country A and Country B agree that sailors from Country B play a significant role in facilitating illicit trafficking via regional ports.

Analysis undertaken by Country A has identified this as a law enforcement issue and has recommended that Country B should be offered technical assistance and capacity building support on this basis. Country B has made clear that this is just one of many challenges they are facing and that the problem is made worse by the ways in which Country A has turned a blind eye, as it sees it, to the laundering of criminal and corrupt proceeds from Country B. So is there lack of political will to tackle trafficking through Country B ports?

Is there political want for this? Key decision makers in Country B do acknowledge the threat the activity poses to their own national security despite high-level political collusion with organised crime. While there is a new head of state with a proven interest in tackling this collusion, it is unclear whether or not other power holders with *political want* have the power to operate against other powerful political and business elites, or if the new head of state has sufficient, and sufficiently powerful, allies to drive through change.

In addition, Country B does not agree with Country A's assessment of the underlying problem being one of law enforcement capacity, instead seeing the challenge primarily as an economic problem, where sailors are underpaid and income generated by illicit trafficking pays them much more than the state can pay them, effectively taking pressure off Country B's own budgets.

Is there political can for this? Country B is facing multiple domestic and foreign threats, and it is facing a challenging fiscal environment. Law enforcement resources are under pressure, and capacity is weak relative to threats faced. There is little fiscal room for manoeuvre, compounded by the fact that sailors are only one part of the corrupt and criminal chain that facilitates trafficking. Even if raising sailors' salaries was possible, it would very probably lead to demands from a whole range of other groups, and while it may work for some individuals, organised crime groups can always pay more than the state and so this is unlikely to be a feasible solution unless the wider economic situation improves. There are clear legal frameworks in place that include provision for sanctions against those who facilitate illicit trafficking, but there are not enough resources available to enforce these. Reformers are regularly targeted by organised crime gangs and politically connected persons, and assassinations are not uncommon.

In short, unless Country A is clearly willing (and able) to improve its offer and give Country B confidence that it can count on sufficient commitments from Country A to improve capacity at a much broader level, it is unlikely that a shift in 'political can' will be possible.

Is there political must for this? While there is internal pressure in Country B to do something about organised crime and corruption, this specific issue – sailors and illicit trafficking through regional ports – does not seem to rate as high a threat as other issues. While there is some external pressure, it also is not as high a priority for external actors – including Country A – in comparison to other threats, such as high-level political collusion, state capture and destabilising conflict in part of Country B. There is also the question of what would happen if a *successful* law enforcement approach was taken: what would happen to livelihoods if criminal proceeds were taken away but not replaced with legal alternatives? Could this displace one set of criminal collusion with another, one that could be worse? Could it potentially worsen conflict dynamics and in doing so further destabilise a region of significant interest to Country A?

Alternative recommendations for Country A could include, for example:

- a) **if Country A continues to see lack of law enforcement capacity as the primary problem:** improving the offer to ensure that there are sufficient resources to tackle the problem in a more systemic way, such as providing a package of technical assistance for law enforcement *and* a package of aid to help boost sailors' livelihoods as well as others in the trafficking 'value chain', with the provision that this assistance is dependent on agreed actions to tackle SOC and high-level corruption;
- b) **if Country A reassesses the threat in line with Country B's own concerns:** improving the offer by linking any support for tackling illicit trafficking to support for other national security concerns shared by both Country A and Country B, including potential military support to assist in its conflict challenges; and
- c) **if Country A acknowledges its own role in enabling illicit trafficking:** working with Country B and with like-minded others in Country A to put pressure on power holders in Country A to ensure that any proceeds from trafficking and other criminal and corrupt activities are not laundered through their own systems.

This hypothetical case again shows why getting *problem identification* right is the primary step in identifying politically and technically feasible strategies and interventions. It also helps to reinforce a point made earlier: that those wanting to nudge political will – whether external actors, in this case, or domestic actors – must also undertake an honest and realistic assessment of their *own* 'political want, political can and political must' in the face of what will always be challenging work with uncertain outcomes in a world with multiple competing demands for time and resources. This is clearly easier to say than it is to do, but it is essential for trying to develop more feasible and more effective strategies and interventions.

Next steps

The hypothetical cases, based in part on real-world examples, are here to illustrate how the *political want, political can, political must* approach could be used to deepen our understanding of what (lack of) political will actually means in specific cases and how this could trigger alternative approaches. The cases also demonstrate how we may not see *political want, political can, and political must* simultaneously and also how better analysis will not remove

uncertainty or complexity. As Marquette and Peiffer explain, 'Put simply: tackling corruption [and organised crime] is hard, and successful, sustainable anti-corruption [and counter-SOC] interventions are unlikely to be those that promise simple solutions to often complex, deeply-entrenched social, economic and political problems.'²⁵

In other words, better understanding *political want, political can* and *political must* may be necessary, but it will not guarantee success in the end. It can only help us better understand the reality on the ground and, thus, confront it; certainly a significant improvement on ploughing ahead regardless, or a resigned shrug, or perhaps simply missing out on opportunities to try something more likely to work.

The ambition going forward is to test out the approach in a range of contexts to build up wider test case examples. This could potentially lead to new insights on things like how reformers could better prepare for and seize critical junctures, or how changes in framing might nudge power holders towards *political want* or *political must*, and so on.

With this in mind, we welcome feedback on the approach here and to hear from people who use it in their work. Please email us at SOCACE@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

²⁵ Marquette & Peiffer (2020). p. 8.

Sources

- Brinkerhoff, D (2010). *Unpacking the concept of political will to confront corruption*. Bergen: U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Chr. Michelsen Institute. U4 Brief: 1. <https://www.u4.no/publications/unpacking-the-concept-of-political-will-to-confront-corruption>.
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The Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) research programme aims to help 'unlock the black box of political will' for tackling serious organised crime, illicit finance and transnational corruption through research that informs politically feasible, technically sound interventions and strategies. Funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), SOC ACE is a new component in the Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) research programme, alongside Global Integrity ACE and SOAS ACE. SOC ACE is managed by the University of Birmingham, working in collaboration with a number of leading research organisations and through consultation and engagement with key stakeholders.

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