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CURBING CORRUPTION: IDEAS THAT WORK | JULY 2015

Integrity Gets Great Ratings

How Nepalese people harnessed the power of reality TV to strike a blow against corruption.

by Blair Glencorse and Suman Parajuli

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ABOUT CURBING CORRUPTION: IDEAS THAT WORK

The *Democracy Lab* and Legatum Institute have commissioned a series of case studies that examine specific interventions against corruption which have produced positive results. The aim is to tell a set of stories that illustrate how combatting corruption works in practice, which may offer insight on some of the larger issues across the globe. The papers will form the basis of a conference in September 2015, and will focus on broader themes, such as developing methods to combat corruption, promoting good outcomes, and measuring success. The goal of this project is to identify ideas that do and don't work and share them with the wider anti-corruption and policy communities.

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With thanks to the Legatum Foundation for its kind sponsorship

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About the authors

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To Gyan Mani Nepal, the newly appointed head of education in Panchthar, a small and beautiful corner of far eastern Nepal, the situation in his school district was a depressing reminder of his own youth. Teacher absenteeism was as high as 90 percent; those who did come to work often showed up drunk. Others shook principals down for bribes just to come to their jobs. Schools were regularly shut down by political strikes. School buildings were shoddily built and basic supplies were unavailable. Standards were abysmal, with students as old as 14 unable to read and write. The district education office itself was corrupt and inefficient. To add insult to injury, most teachers in the district sent their own children to private schools.

Assigned to his new post in January 2013, Gyan Mani was determined not to let this state of affairs stand—so he set about cleaning house. The ex-schoolteacher started by making the education budget publicly available to citizens, who could then track district spending. He invited the local press to write about his district's systemic problems. He fired staff members who broke rules and recruited students to monitor teacher attendance by putting an attendance log in classrooms. He visited every school in the district, sometimes incognito. He took video to document mismanagement, chatted with students about ways to help, and handed out his personal phone number to parents and students so they could register their complaints.

The results were impressive. Over 200 teachers received disciplinary warnings; 100 ultimately resigned. Teacher attendance is now over 90 percent. "I believe that the pass rate in the district will rise from 14 percent to over 60 percent," Gyan Mani told us, "[and] within this year and I am most hopeful that my campaign will lead the literacy rate to rise to 100 percent." Panchthar, previously rock bottom of the list of districts for educational achievement—measured by student enrolment, pass rates, and final exam results—is headed for the top of the upcoming annual government rankings. But Gyan Mani's success posed a question: How could other reformers build on his example?

Nepal has had a long history of exclusionary, corrupt decision-making under the feudal regimes of the past. Even after democracy emerged in the 1990s, culminating in a popular movement that overthrew the king in 2008, very little changed. Many of the reasons for the 10-year-long Maoist insurrection, which ended in 2006, have yet to be addressed. Nepalese people are overwhelmingly poor. Over a quarter of them live on \$1.25 a day—a problem exacerbated by the recent devastating earthquakes in which almost 9,000 Nepalese people were killed. (Nearly three million remain in need, according to the United Nations.)

As in many other developing countries, graft has become a fact of life. Nepal ranks 126th out of 164 countries on Transparency International's most recent Corruption Perceptions Index. Reforms of the sort Gyan Mani was pushing go unrecognized or are reversed by political elites that have a stake in the dysfunction. Hiring decisions are based on political affiliation and patronage. Corrupt bureaucrats often pay handsomely to be sent to the districts where graft is understood to be widespread.

Having witnessed the failure of governance in Nepal, we at Accountability Lab—a non-profit incubator for creative ideas about accountability and transparency—realized that

examples of reformers like Gyan Mani offered an opportunity to establish a positive, self-reinforcing narrative about integrity.

Citizens in Nepal understand that the system is deeply corrupt, but they often feel helpless. They have no opportunity to publicly celebrate honest officials. Public dialogue tends to focus not on integrity but on malfeasance, with an emphasis on finger-pointing and name-calling. This results in frustration because people feel they have no say in these public matters.

Our idea was not to “name and shame” the law-breakers, but to “name and fame” those officials who were doing the right thing. The government had previously hosted a Best Civil Servant of the Year award, but last year the ceremony was cancelled amid allegations that it had itself become politicised and corrupt, concerns aggravated by a less than transparent selection process.

One day, sitting on cushions and drinking tea with a group of students in Kathmandu, members of the Lab’s Nepali team hit on an idea. Popular media have proven effective in shaping public opinion on certain social ills, such as smoking. And reality television shows—usually focused on singing and dancing—are among the most popular in South Asia. So we decided to create one of our own, with a twist. We dubbed it *Integrity Idol*. We worked with a local youth-run production company to produce a show targeting young people. (We decided on that focus because the population skews heavily to the young; according to the last census, the average age in Nepal is just 21). Citizens from all over the country were invited to nominate honest government officials by using a simple nomination form. Our existing network of hundreds of volunteers spread the word in their villages, put out the call through a social media blitz, and visited government offices. The rules were very simple: the nominee had to have served as an active civil servant for at least five years and to have demonstrated integrity. If selected as a finalist, he or she had to commit to make the trip to Kathmandu for filming. (Thankfully no singing was involved.)

We received over 300 nominations and organized a team to verify the details of each. We called those who had benefited from the work of those nominees and cross-checked their backgrounds with trusted local sources. Then, with the help of a panel of respected national experts—including children’s rights advocate Anuradha Koirala and Suryanath Upadhyay, the well-regarded former head of Nepal’s national anti-corruption body—we narrowed down the list to the top five. The finalists included a social worker in a part of the country so remote that she has to walk for three days to reach some of her clients in outlying villages, and a health supervisor who has served citizens for the past 16 years without any time off. And, of course, Gyan Mani Nepal, for his pioneering reforms in Panchthar.

In Kathmandu, these finalists were filmed talking about their work, interacting with citizens, and answering questions posed by a panel of young people. We edited all of this into 30-minute *Integrity Idol* episodes and put them out on national television each day for a week (once at eight PM, prime time in Nepal, and once four hours later, to make sure we also reached viewers from the significant Nepali diaspora in the Middle East). Over the course of two weeks we asked people to vote, using a dedicated SMS code or e-mail, or by

assigning “likes” to videos of their preferred candidates on Facebook and YouTube. We even urged them to vote by postal ballot. The show proved incredibly popular, reaching as many as three million people (a tenth of the population), according to figures from NTV Plus, the channel that aired the show. Viewers cast nearly 10,000 votes over the course of two weeks.

The programme created a national discussion—online, in tea shops, and among families—about what it means to be a public official in Nepal and what it takes to demonstrate integrity within a corrupt and deeply politicized system. Citizens blogged about why *Integrity Idol* mattered, while politicians began asking how they could become part of it. The campaign was covered extensively in the Nepali and international media. Nepal’s government, suddenly realizing that it needed to tap into the movement or risk being left behind, agreed to publish the profiles of all five finalists on government websites as public examples for the civil service. The Chief Secretary in Nepal (the top civil servant) called one day and offered to serve as chair of the awards ceremony.

With all the votes counted, it was Gyan Mani who came out on top for his pioneering reforms in Panchthar. He was crowned as “*Integrity Idol*” in a televised ceremony attended by over 350 politicians, bureaucrats, civil society representatives, businessmen, youth groups, and activists. There was no monetary prize at all—just a trophy, public recognition, and a nice cup of Nepali tea. As Gyan Mani pointed out in his acceptance speech: “This award is very important because it was given to me by citizens who are the taxpayers. For that it is more prestigious than any monetary award. That is why *Integrity Idol* means so much to me.”

The campaign only ended in January of this year, but it has given a remarkable impetus to change. Politicians and other elites in Panchthar, who previously sent their children to private schools, are now signing them up within the public system—to the point that many public schools are now over-subscribed. District education officers in other districts have been calling Gyan Mani for support to develop similar efforts in their districts. The chief district officer for Panchthar immediately pledged to replicate Gyan Mani’s reform programme—including spot checks on facilities and complaint hotlines—across other sectors, such as health care. (Nominations for *Integrity Idol* 2015 were open for just a few weeks before the recent earthquakes, and the chief district officer for Panchthar has already been nominated, among hundreds of other reformers from across the country.)

Six model schools have been set up based on the reforms pioneered by Gyan Mani, and the new teachers and staffers there are working hard to ensure success. The Regional Education Director recently visited the district and pledged to scale up Gyan Mani’s model not just in eastern Nepal but across the country, and has begun to mobilize public finances to do so. Before *Integrity Idol*, the national government had no process in place for consulting educational officials on policy reform issues. Recently, however, the National Committee for Education Policy Reform sent Gyan Mani the first draft of their reform agenda, asking for feedback.

In this way, *Integrity Idol* has created a virtuous circle of recognition, reward, and reform that has reached well beyond Nepal’s borders. Having heard about the competition,

Oxfam invited Gyan Mani to visit the United States to brief policymakers on local-level reform efforts in developing countries. We've had requests to roll out *Integrity Idol* in many other countries, and we're starting corresponding projects in Pakistan and Liberia.

Back in Nepal, *Integrity Idol*'s blend of popular culture with the critical issue of fighting corruption is proving a potent combination, tapping into the public desire for a positive narrative about change and civic participation. We carried out a recent survey of citizens that showed more than twice as much interest in these issues today than this time last year. Widely publicized instances of corruption during the post-earthquake relief effort are reinforcing this trend as citizens demand more accountability.

Thanks in part to the publicity generated by *Integrity Idol*, public officials have been making unprecedented public commitments to reform. Teachers unions and political parties have signed a code of conduct that, among other things, bans political strikes in schools and makes all school revenues and expenditures transparent for 450 schools across the Panchthar district. (Gyan Mani served as the focal point of a ceremony to mark the signing of the code: Thousands of kids and their parents staged a march in his honour, chanting "He's the people's winner!") The public celebration of integrity is an approach that works with the grain and builds on areas of progress, which, arguably, is more efficient than fighting entrenched interests or trying to fill voids of dysfunction.

This was a bottom-up, volunteer effort, not a big budget, donor-driven project. We made no use of western film-makers, state-of-the-art equipment, or professional marketing techniques. We used journalism students as TV presenters. And we spread the word through Facebook for free. From start to finish, the entire process cost a little under \$4,000, most of which was spent on travel for the nominees and television air time. Our experience suggests that supporting positive change around the world has little to do with money; that, in fact, is often the least important ingredient. Rather it is about mobilizing the other resources that exist everywhere—ideas, networks and energy—and channelling them into a process that captures people's imagination by allowing them to conceive of a better alternative reality.

After the recent earthquakes in Nepal, we checked in with Gyan Mani to make sure he was safe and to ask what he was doing in response to the disaster. Panchthar, far from the centre of the quake, suffered relatively little damage. Yet Gyan Mani told us his district has also experienced significant problems with corruption in the relief effort; he has been organizing volunteers to anonymously check the validity of these claims and report the wrongdoers to the authorities. One official has already been fired as a result, with several more under investigation. "This is part of my job not as a government worker, but as a citizen," he told us. Then he added: "Before *Integrity Idol*, people didn't know who I was or would criticize me for trying to fix problems like this. Now, when I walk down the street they say, 'Idol Sir is coming.'"



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978-1-907409-85-1



JULY 2015