

UNODC Executive Director’s Keynote Address
8th Symposium of the Independent Commission Against
Corruption of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
of China

Title of the Address: “Crossroads: threats and opportunities on the
path to ending corruption.”

Wednesday, May 22, 2024, 9:00 AM

Your Excellency Mr. John Lee Ka-Chiu,

Your Excellency Mr Woo Ying-ming,

Distinguished Speakers,

Honourable Ministers,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address you at this landmark Symposium of the Independent Commission Against Corruption of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China.

I want to start by congratulating the ICAC on its golden jubilee.

This year we mark five decades of ICAC’s transformative journey, a journey that has enabled Hong Kong’s rise to become an economic powerhouse that boasts remarkable anti-corruption success stories.

ICAC was started as a way to address organized crime and corruption, and many other governments learned important lessons from that experience.

You can look back on the past 50 years with pride.

I also want to thank ICAC, as well as the International Association of Anti-Corruption Authorities, IAACA, for hosting this Symposium.

I applaud your dedication to multilateralism, and your efforts to unite anti-corruption efforts from different regions of the world around the UN Convention against Corruption.

Excellencies,

The theme of this Symposium is a very timely one: charting a new path towards combatting corruption.

In this era of uncertainty, as crises rage and threats simmer, we need to re-think and revitalize anti-corruption efforts.

And to chart a new path, we first need to comprehend and appreciate the impact of corruption today.

It is not an exaggeration to say that corruption underpins many of the biggest challenges facing humanity today.

As we struggle to achieve Agenda 2030, corruption obstructs all of the Sustainable Development Goals.

As poverty and inequality rise worldwide, corruption is draining development resources and impacting the most vulnerable groups disproportionately, including women, children, and refugees.

As conflict engulfs the world and violence spreads, corruption is eroding the rule of law, as well as peace, security and human rights.

As trust deteriorates and polarization takes hold, corruption is threatening political and democratic processes, a threat that is especially relevant this year with elections set to take place in at least 64 countries.

And as our planet warms and our environment suffers, corruption is allowing private interests to exploit nature, and hampering the global response.

But when we speak of corruption and its impact, it is important to go beyond general statements.

It is important to contextualize what we are speaking about, and to look at concrete examples. And I want to highlight a few examples where the corrosive effect of corruption can be particularly damaging, and where anti-corruption action is paramount.

In large investment projects, corruption in both the public and private sectors can inflate costs, stifle competition, and undermine results.

The most conservative estimates suggest that procurement contracts lose around 8 per cent of their value to corruption, a global total of around 880 billion dollars.

This is more than 5 times the sum of development aid disbursed in 2019, and it highlights the need to improve procurement practices, especially in developing countries.

I was very happy to participate in China's Clean Silk Road Forum last year, where we discussed the importance of protecting the trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative from corruption.

In the health sector, corruption creates dangerous risks, from medical ghost workers, distorted procurement systems to infiltration of falsified medicines into markets to theft or unfair distribution of vaccines.

We saw many of these risks clearly during the COVID-19 pandemic, underlining the need for robust oversight.

The World Health Organization estimates that around 500 billion dollars per year in public health spending is lost to corruption.

This is an amount higher than the projected cost of achieving Universal Health Care by 2030. Recovering the funds lost to corruption in health spending could put that goal within reach.

In sports, the influx of huge sums of money at the top level has changed the game and the risks involved.

The global sports market is valued by some estimates at more than 480 billion dollars, and we are seeing new levels of competition manipulation and infiltration of organized crime, requiring stronger frameworks for prevention, detection, investigation, and sanctioning.

And last, but certainly not least, corruption in criminal justice systems can be catastrophic.

It impedes access to justice, spreads impunity, and undermines people's trust in governments and the rule of law.

And it creates an environment where there is motive and means for illicit activity to thrive.

This brings me to what is perhaps the most urgent dimension of corruption that I want to highlight today: the avenues it creates for organized crime.

The dangers posed by transnational organized crime are growing across the globe.

The UN General Assembly recognized this fact earlier this year when it designated 15 November as the international day for the fight against transnational organized crime, as did the Security Council when it held a session on this topic in December of last year.

And corruption provides much of the infrastructure that sustains organized crime.

From the borders of Southeast Asia and Latin America to the ports of Western Europe and West Africa, corruption enables drugs and other trafficked goods to escape detection.

From the Mekong to the Sahel to the Amazon, corruption enables crimes like illegal logging, illegal mining, and wildlife trafficking.

And across all illicit markets, corruption props up the criminal financial networks that protect and conceal the proceeds of crime.

We see a stark example of this in the Golden Triangle region, where gaps of regulation and enforcement have allowed illegal casinos and cryptocurrency exchanges to act as money laundering centres for organized crime.

We cannot make headway against organized crime without fighting corruption.

Excellencies,

Corruption challenges are more global and more urgent than ever.

So, as the theme of this symposium asks, how can we chart a new path forward to fight corruption?

I want to underline four key priorities that can help pave a new path for anti-corruption efforts, and that the UN Office on Drugs and Crime considers essential in our work going forward.

The first priority is to future-proof responses to corruption, by leveraging the positive role of technology and unleashing the potential of youth.

New technologies are giving rise to corruption risks and regulation gaps, but they also hold huge promise in potential uses for good.

Digitization boosts transparency and digital platforms provide simple ways to report corruption, while data mining and artificial intelligence can detect patterns of collusion and provide more accurate assessments of risks.

We need to explore how we can maximize benefit from these tools.

And we need to work with young people on this and other anti-corruption endeavours, channelling their passion, optimism, and innovation towards creating a renewed culture of integrity.

At UNODC, we saw what youth can bring to the table when we organized our Coding 4 Integrity Hackathons, where youth came together to develop groundbreaking anti-corruption solutions.

And we continue to see it every day through the work of our GRACE Initiative, which engages young people on anti-corruption work and helps educate the next generation of integrity leaders.

That is why UNODC was proud to collaborate with ICAC and IAACA to develop a Policy Guide for National Anti-Corruption Authorities on Meaningful Youth Engagement in Anti-Corruption Work.

We were also very happy to help ICAC identify young panellists for this Symposium, including from UNODC's YouthLED Integrity Advisory Board, to make sure young voices are represented at this important event.

The second priority is to unlock the full potential of international and regional anti-corruption frameworks, and to streamline cross border cooperation.

The UN Convention against Corruption, the UNCAC, provides a globally agreed framework against corruption with near-universal adherence, and last year we celebrated 20 years of UNCAC and the progress it embodies.

But there is still plenty of room for improvement in its implementation.

In the short term, we must facilitate direct and informal cooperation between anti-corruption authorities, and in this regard the establishment of the GlobE Network has been a milestone step.

GlobE counts 203 authorities from 113 countries among its members, offering law enforcement authorities easy access to contact points in other countries to exchange experiences and information on anti-corruption cases.

ICAC has been an active member and supportive partner of GlobE, and I encourage other anti-corruption entities to follow in the same footsteps.

In long term, we need to identify and address implementation challenges, and the UNCAC's review mechanism has been at the core of this effort.

Supported by UNODC, 177 States Parties have completed their peer reviews, and many of them have undertaken domestic reforms and steps to strengthen laws and institutions.

The review process has already reflected a shared commitment to strengthen international cooperation, including extradition, mutual legal assistance, and law enforcement cooperation.

And it has identified the need for more resources to build capacities, and more efforts to build trust.

The next UNCAC Conference of States Parties in 2025 will be an opportunity to take stock of the lessons learned from the current phase of the review mechanism, and to reflect on the next phase.

The third priority I want to talk about is the need to address gaps in capacities through partnerships.

The global response to corruption is only as strong as its weakest link.

Providing training and sharing best practices is essential, and here I want to congratulate the ICAC on its newly established International Academy Against Corruption.

UNODC stands ready to support the Academy's technical assistance work.

Our Office has extensive experience providing technical assistance on the ground, including through our five regional anti-corruption hubs. And we already have a good track record of working with ICAC.

Our new Memorandum of Understanding can help us expand that cooperation, providing a blueprint for similar collaboration.

Beyond governments and international organizations, we also need to bolster partnerships with the private sector, civil society, and academia, who have indispensable roles in the fight against corruption.

And the fourth and final priority I want to highlight is the need to better understand corruption and its trends, through robust measurement, research, and analysis.

Measuring corruption can foster transparency and accountability of public institutions, attract investors, and raise awareness, but it is a complex and often politicized task.

There are many inaccurate, deceptive, and misunderstood numbers and estimates floating around when it comes to corruption.

Data is critical to acquire an accurate picture of the challenges and inform responses.

That is why, last year, UNODC developed a statistical framework to support States in building national systems to measure corruption, using a comprehensive and context-specific approach.

We also continue to produce dedicated thematic reports that shed light on specific dimensions of corruption, including corruption in particular sectors like sports, forestry, and fisheries, as well as the gender dimensions of corruption.

I invite you to make use of these tools, and to support our efforts to better understand corruption.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Corruption is undermining everything we fight for, and empowering everything we fight against.

And it is finding new opportunities to entrench itself in the cracks between countries and jurisdictions, as the gaps of trust grow wider.

As we stand at this historic crossroads of challenges and opportunities, we need to seize every chance to close those gaps, and to innovate in the face of growing corruption challenges, together.

In September, UN Member States will convene at the Summit of the Future to reinvigorate multilateralism and rally around shared solutions to global problems.

It will be a valuable chance to renew international commitment to integrity, accountability, and transparency, as well as to collective action against corruption.

The Chinese astrologer Shibo posited that “harmony begets new things”.

By uniting around the UNCAC and working in harmony, we can chart a new path to fight corruption, and we can walk that path together.

Thank you.