

Interview with Huguette Labelle, Chair of Transparency International

"Corruption is like adding fuel to the fire of violence"

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Even though the various offices Huguette Labelle held in the Canadian Civil Service for almost three decades forced her to travel all over the American continent, Venezuela was one of the few countries she never visited. As from 2005, Labelle heads Transparency International (TI), a leading international non-governmental organization addressing corruption worldwide.

Yet, the congress "Consolidating Change: the Inter-American Convention against Corruption in its Second Decade" held in Caracas by the Venezuelan chapter of such organization was enough for this expert in development issues to decide to pay a visit to our country and seize the opportunity to answer back some criticisms made to TI by Venezuelan authorities.

Q: The Venezuelan government rejects your annual Corruption Perceptions reports and accuses Transparency International of being involved in a secret plan to discredit it. What is your opinion about it?

A: Following the annual disclosure of our reports, namely the Corruption Perceptions Index (a comparative listing of global corruption), poor performing countries never stop complaining. It is important for people to learn that these reports are the result of a number of studies and polls conducted by renowned international pollsters such as Gallup and The Economist. We just obtain information from 13 or 14 pollsters and complement it with studies made by experts in each one of the countries. That is neither our criteria nor our judgement, but the experts'.

Q: But are you involved in a plot against the government of President Hugo Chávez?

A: Certainly not (...) What we are trying to do, all over the world, is to join forces with the civil society, the private sector and the governments to allow for a greater transparency in the way public funds are handled, so that they are appropriately used to boost development and reduce poverty. Our approach has always laid stress on working on a constructive basis.

Q: What do you intend to achieve with your assessments?

A: Many governments use our reports as a diagnosis instrument and review the information thoroughly. Still, there is a feature common to leaders all over the world. They make promises, enact laws and set up institutions, but what people want is action. When people see that the promises are kept and yield results and last in time, their opinion about corruption changes completely.

Q: Would you persuade the Venezuelan authorities not to view your reports as a scathing attack and rather make the most of them just to be aware of the government's mistakes?

A: I recommend that in every single country the private sector, the civil society -and our national chapter as part of it- as well as the government strive to work jointly and not in isolation, because that is a recipe for success.

Q: In most Latin American countries, including Venezuela, corruption is viewed as common. People is no longer astonished or worried when a case of embezzlement of public funds is brought to light, as the diverted money would seem to belong to nobody. How can you stop that from happening?

A: We must be aware of the fact that it is the poor who suffer the most the consequences of corruption. For instance, in a country, which I prefer not to mention, monthly household income, according to 2005 data, was about US\$ 250. To cap it all, we found out that 40 percent of that amount was put aside for paying bribes. People had to pay a bribe to secure a place for their children in school, have their children attended in hospital or get a permit to set up a micro business. That illustrates how the poor are the people most hit by this calamity, and that undermines democracy in any country.

Q: Does corruption undermine democracy?

A: Corruption distorts markets, undermines democracy and is like adding fuel to (the fire) of violence because it prevents poverty from being reduced. In this regard, public funds are diverted into others ends that are not intended for the good of communities. In fact, my view is that corruption puts the democratic principles of any country in jeopardy.

Q: How can this situation be changed?

A. The media plays a decisive role in this. They have to report on how corruption hits people. We have to make people more aware of (the consequences of) corruption, ever since they are in school. Previously, civic education was included in all school curricula, and in my opinion it has to be reintroduced from elementary school to university studies so that people are well aware of the hazard of corruption, of how public funds must be handled and how to exert their rights legally.

Q: Scandinavian countries are said to be the less corrupt in the world. What do they do there that we do not do here in Venezuela? Can their recipe be applied here too?

A: Countries can successfully fight corruption only by means of sound legislation and strong and independent institutions. (In those countries) government officials are appointed according to their merits and regulating agencies are autonomous. People are allowed to access public information and those who report on a corruption case are protected through special mechanisms. On the other hand, political leaders are strongly committed to fight corruption, and if any case comes to light, the authorities open an investigation into it and culprits face trial immediately afterwards. Rulers are aware that they have to give an account of their actions to the people, the civil society works jointly and there is freedom of the press.

Translated by Servio Vilorio