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The corruption fight

CORRUPTION and poverty are two sides of the same coin. They feed off each other and act as barriers to overcoming one another. That has been patently, and increasingly, obvious each year that Transparency International has published its corruption perception index.

The five countries perceived to be most corrupt of the 156 surveyed — Chad, Bangladesh, Turkmenistan, Burma and Haiti — are also among the poorest in the world. That is not to say that many of the wealthier countries such as Canada and Ireland are immune to crime and corruption — they are not. Indeed, if one considers the index by region, no single region has done particularly well on average. This means that all have countries that are tackling significant corruption issues.

But it is telling that the lowest-scoring countries on the index are also the poorest. It is thus perhaps inevitable that Africa, with so much poverty, is the most corrupt continent in the world, according to Transparency International. Oil-rich Chad, which is marked by political instability, human rights abuses and poor press freedom, is not only perceived as the most corrupt country in Africa, it is the most graft-ridden in the world. But then there is Botswana, which has made it into the top 20% of countries considered least corrupt, showing what a stable democracy overseen by a strong constitution and watchful media can achieve.

SA slipped two places in the index, from 44 to 46. The drop, albeit tiny, is nevertheless of concern because it shows that business leaders and analysts still see corruption as a significant and even increasing feature of the South African landscape.

It is all very well to question Transparency International's methodology, as did South African Public Service Commission chairman Stan Sangweni. And it is hard not to be disappointed that President Thabo Mbeki's strong stance on the corruption scandal surrounding former deputy president Jacob Zuma did not help propel SA to a higher position on the index.

But perceptions matter. They matter because corruption is one of the risk factors that investors take into consideration when deciding where to place their money. Sometimes the reward is sufficiently great for rampant corruption not to feature quite so much in investment decision-making — Angola being a case in point. But it nevertheless plays a role. And the perception among those

surveyed is that SA remains vulnerable to corruption.

That is just one of the reasons it is so vital that Mbeki's current strong stance on corruption be taken seriously and be carried through.

In recent weeks, Mbeki has used strong language in denouncing those in the African National Congress (ANC) who are using the ruling party to enrich themselves rather than serve the poor. The president has even gone so far as to say that government would rather create temporarily unstable municipalities by removing corrupt officials than allow corruption to continue unabated.

This is fighting talk. And perhaps his words are having an effect on the ground; the Free State ANC fired Mangaung mayor Papi Mokoena this week after he was arrested in July following alleged tender irregularities.

But taking a strong public stance against corruption is just one of the ways of dealing with the issue. If poverty and corruption are interlinked as closely as the Transparency International and similar surveys suggest, then government will have to back its corruption-busting activities with an equally aggressive plan to implement its new economic growth initiative.

That is already in the works, with government now taking its recently released growth blueprint to business and labour to get their buy-in. It's just a matter of keeping up the momentum on both fronts.

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