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## **HOW NGOS SHOULD ENGAGE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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The Constitution of South Africa remains one of the most admirable and progressive documents in the history of the world. It contains broad civil, political and socio-economic rights, it embraces the duties of the State and it strengthens the collective wellbeing of its citizens. Nevertheless, reality looks different and the aspirations made 25 years ago have repeatedly been destroyed by among others, rampant corruption, growing inequality and bad governance.

These three problems go hand in hand. Because politicians are more focused on their personal benefits than on the wellbeing of the public, the result of corruption will always be bad governance. Frequently bad governance leads to inequality because no real efforts to fight it through redistribution, education or creation of employment opportunities are made. Therefore, unsurprisingly, one of the biggest threats to the demolition of South African aspirations is the ongoing public sector corruption, which means that tax revenue is being used by corrupt public officials to get rich at the expense of others. The Gupta-leaks together with all the other scandals in the public and in the private sector - which have been exposed by the media - have shown that quite clearly. The question is, how can we prevent such things from recurring? And by we, I mean civil society, the ones suffering the most from corruption.

One answer could be the empowerment of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and of other independent institutions. NGOs are the voice of civil society in South Africa and in other countries all over the world. It is their job to engage in effective agenda-setting, to clarify and to reveal information to the public, to put pressure on decision-making processes, and to monitor the compliance of any kind of agreement between different parties. All these tasks have the common goal of representing and strengthening the interests of civil society, including the uniting interest of eradicating corruption in the public sector.

However, the work of NGOs is based on reciprocity: while NGOs represent the interest of the public, they rely heavily on the active participation of civil society. Fortunately, the last few months have proved that the citizens of South Africa are moving away from passive acceptance of corruption and misconduct in the public sector. Civil society finally seems to recall its long history of active resistance, the major role it played in the fight against apartheid and how much influence the core of society can have in general. The extent of litigation against the State launched by civil society organisations in 2017 is proof of this assumption. This step was crucial, as civil society should never be silent. It is our obligation to not only demonstrate to all levels of governance that we always keep an eye on their actions but also to urge prosecution for any corrupt actions. Only then, will public institutions be encouraged to initiate stricter anti-corruption measures.

Nevertheless, it is equally important to remember that civil society should not confront the State in a hostile way but criticise constructively, in order to build relationships and



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encourage improvement. This important pillar of democracy seems to get lost in the current struggles the country is facing and needs to be rebuilt - with the help of the new government and with help of the major NGOs.

This can only be done with transparency on both sides. On the one hand, the monitoring process must be transparent and open to all stakeholders of civil society, who are representing the voice of their citizens. A lack of transparency will otherwise affect its credibility and validity. On the other hand, transparency on the side of the government is the only key to guarantee an effective monitoring process. That means that we rely on President Ramaphosa and other role models, to clear the way towards a more transparent future in the public sector. For this we need to constantly put pressure on the government so that they start enforcing existing legislation to punish corruption immediately. Taking all aspects into account one can say that civil society and NGOs should stand at the forefront of striving against corruption but at the same time need to act in concert with reliant partners from the private and public sector.

Finally, it must be said that NGOs are surely not the innocent lambs in a non-perfect world. The possibility for corruption and misconduct is as big as in any other sector. NGOs therefore have to strive to maintain their independence by avoiding any suspect allegiances with State agencies and political parties. NGOs need to follow their principles of fully acting in the interest of the public, and channel the different opinions of the people into clear messages. In this way they will not only grow in their role of being a watchdog to the public sector but also pave the way for a change in South African politics.

As former US Vice President, Joe Biden, once stated: *“No fundamental social change occurs merely because government acts. It because civil society, the conscience of a country, begins to rise up and demand - demand - demand change”.*