

“They don’t even want to have the discussion” Governments battle over openness at UN anti-corruption meeting



Panama 29 November 2013, As a UN anti-corruption summit comes to a close today, governments are battling over whether UN anti-corruption meetings should be open to NGO observers. “This was an occasion for all those opposing corruption to come together and consolidate, but a small group of determined countries are still keeping NGO observers out of important discussions. This weakens the international community’s global anti-corruption efforts, because NGO expertise is missing.” said Vincent Lazatin of the UNCAC Coalition.

An initiative by Switzerland and Norway to put the issue on the agenda of the next UN anti-corruption summit in St. Petersburg in 2015 is currently under discussion in plenary session at the UN meeting and is overwhelmingly supported by countries, but with a small group opposing it.

During the discussions in Panama on the tenth anniversary of the UN Convention against Corruption, a few countries have insisted on deleting from conference draft resolutions any strong references to transparency and public participation, though they appear more comfortable with including the private sector. They also blocked any discussion of involvement of NGOs in the review mechanism for the UN Convention. “Indeed, our impression is that efforts even to raise the question of the contribution of non-governmental organizations to the Mechanism have been hindered by some States Parties, most recently here in Panama.” observed a Finnish delegate in a formal statement at the meeting.

The UN Convention itself emphasizes transparency and civil society participation in the fight against corruption. “Ultimately this is about whether countries at UN anti-corruption meetings follow the principles and practices of openness and inclusion required at country level under the UN anti-corruption and UN human rights conventions. Other UN fora do better.” said Lazatin.

Despite this dispute, countries have been able to make some small progress at the conference. Asset recovery emerged as an issue of concern to many governments and Nigerian and US delegates were locked all week in intensive discussions over their draft proposals on enhancing asset recovery efforts worldwide. The main bone of contention was language about plea bargains and settlements in foreign bribery cases

but this is being resolved.

A notable positive development is the strong language on transparency of beneficial ownership championed by the governments of the US and Argentina in draft resolution text. Also important is language emphasizing that countries receiving assets should proactively freeze those assets when there is a suspicion of corruption and should also do more to assist other countries in investigations and related proceedings. “Progress in these areas of enforcement, among others, is essential to put an end to impunity.” said Lazatin.

The conference also facilitated exchanges of experience in workshops on subjects like corruption in the judiciary and corruption and human rights.

While recognizing that moving along such a large body takes time, NGOs were disappointed with the meager results compared with the magnitude of the problem. “Global corrupt networks are much more efficient than anti-corruption networks and we need to move much faster to counter this.” said Lazatin. “If we continue to proceed at snail’s pace, the corrupt will keep well ahead of us and we will fail in the battle against corruption, with terrible costs to people all around the world.”

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Note to Editors

The [United Nations Convention against Corruption \(UNCAC\)](#) is the most comprehensive global legal framework for combating corruption. It is a binding agreement by [168 states parties](#) on standards and requirements for preventing, detecting, investigating and sanctioning corruption.

The UNCAC Coalition, formed in 2006, is composed of more than 350 civil society organisations in over 100 countries. Its goal is to promote ratification, implementation and monitoring of the UN Convention against Corruption. More information can be found at <http://www.uncaccoalition.org/>

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