

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

I Paid A Bribe: Tackling Chronic Corruption in Ghana

Bright Kwadwo Sowu



Ghana, a West African country with a population of approximately 31 million, faces challenges such as poverty and economic stagnation which have been exacerbated by chronic corruption.

The prevalence of dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power, typically involving bribery, extortion, nepotism, or fraud, can be seen at various levels of society, and has had a devastating socio-economic impact. Meanwhile, there have been unfortunate setbacks in the implementation and enforcement of Ghana's anti-corruption legislative framework, creating significant obstacles in the fight against corruption. There is a pressing need for collective anti-corruption efforts to ensure adequate and effective laws are developed and enforced, as well as strengthening institutional accountability and ensuring a high level of transparency in the governance of the country. At the forefront of these anti-corruption efforts is Bright, a Commonwealth Alumnus from Ghana who studied for a Master's degree in Development Studies at the University of Cambridge in the UK. As the Head of Programmes for the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition (GACC), and working in partnership with other vital stakeholders, Bright has worked through the GACC to contribute to the passage of two key pieces of legislation in Ghana, the Right to Information Act and Public Financial Management Regulations, both of which are important steps towards effectively reducing corruption and promoting good governance at a national level.



Mr Bright Kwadwo Sowu completed a Master's degree in Development Studies at the University of Cambridge in 2013. He is currently working for the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition (GACC) as Head of Programmes. In this role he has successfully led various projects aimed at reducing corruption in Ghana and worked through the GACC to contribute to the passage of the Right to Information Act and Public Financial Management Regulations. He has influenced increased implementation of the recommendations made by financial auditors in 70 institutions across Ghana, including local government institutions. Bright has also led on the establishment, training, and support of 38 citizen groups across 38 local governments in Ghana, empowering them to hold their leaders accountable. This work has directly led to an increase in reporting of instances of corruption as well as the effective resolution of complaints. He is currently overseeing 12 projects relating to procurement, service delivery, audit recommendation implementation, anti-corruption education and infrastructure which are being implemented in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Benin. Bright is a distinguished author who has been published on issues relating to anti-corruption and good governance, and is a member of Ghana's National Monitoring Committee (MoniCom) on the National Anti-Corruption Action Plan (NACAP).

Passion for Development Awakened

While working for the Japanese Embassy in Accra, Ghana as a Research Officer, Bright realised his passion for innovation and creative problem solving and envisaged that joining the development sector would give him an opportunity to explore his strengths in this area. This gave him the impetus to seek opportunities to pursue further studies, and being awarded the Commonwealth Scholarship to study for a Master's degree in Development Studies was a 'dream come true'.

'I like to be able to do stuff the way I want. I realised that going to Cambridge to study International Development would give me a background that will allow me to work in the development sector, whether I choose to work with a national or an international NGO. I am somebody who's willing to be a citizen of the world, and go where I am needed in terms of doing development work. That's what took me to Cambridge.'

Upon completing his studies, Bright joined the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition (GACC) where he has rapidly progressed within the organisation to his current position as Head of Programmes. GACC promotes good governance and fights against corruption in Ghana. Its key objective is to build the capacity of civil society organisations and mobilise the grassroots to demand accountability from duty bearers, to fight corruption, and to encourage whistleblowing nationwide. The organisation also acknowledges that a coordinated approach is key in the fight against corruption, and has therefore formed strategic partnerships with government institutions, the private sector in Ghana, and civil society organisations. Bright spoke proudly about how he draws on the knowledge and skills acquired while on Scholarship to plan and deliver his anti-corruption projects in Ghana.

'Coming back from the Scholarship I feel like I'm in that development-oriented field. And there's such a direct link between the practical issues and development theory. It gives you this general understanding of socio-economic issues, whether you're talking about migration, corruption, or economic development. Whatever the issue is, that education really prepared me because it was comprehensive.'

He has successfully led various anti-corruption projects and played a pivotal role in influencing the adoption and implementation of regulations to curb corruption in Ghana. His work has contributed to increased reporting of corruption and the resolution of those complaints. The Commonwealth Alumnus has contributed to the establishment, training, and support of citizen groups in 38 local government districts, with the aim of holding their leaders accountable and ensuring good governance of the country.

'I studied for an MPhil in Development Studies, and I currently work as a development practitioner. Clearly, my Master's education has prepared me for the work I am doing. The concepts and ideas I come across are familiar to me and hence, I have a better grasp.'

Championing Adoption and Implementation of the Right to Information Law

The Ghana Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) produced the first draft of the Right to Information Bill for Ghana in 1999, and after a series of reviews it was put before Parliament in 2010 but was rejected. It was not until almost a decade later in 2019 that the Bill was finally revised, accepted, and passed by Parliament as a Law, and subsequently implemented the following year. This Law enables citizens to hold their government accountable and to ensure that there is a high level of transparency in the governance of the country. It gives citizens the freedom to request for information concerning government plans, projects, and expenditure of the taxpayer's money.

As the Head of Programmes for GACC, Bright has worked in partnership with Ghana Integrity Initiative (GII) and SEND-GHANA to implement the Accountable Democratic Institutions and Systems Strengthening (ADISS) project, funded by USAID. The project seeks to build upon ongoing efforts and strategies focused on reducing anti-corruption in Ghana. He has been instrumental in conducting advocacy campaigns that contributed to the acceptance and passing of this important Bill by the Ghana Parliament.

Drawing-up a strategy for engaging citizen groups across different constituencies to fight corruption through advocacy has been a fundamental part of this project. Leading on this required Bright to meet with the members of parliament that represent the citizen groups and organise discussions on the citizens' petitions pushing for the passing of the Right to Information Bill.

The 2016 Ghanaian elections presented a perfect opportunity for Bright and colleagues to lobby for the passing of the Right to Information Bill. When the political parties were drawing up their manifestos, they wrote a memo requesting that each party explicitly commit to passing the Bill, and it emerged as a campaign promise in the manifesto of the New Patriotic Party that subsequently won the elections.

'With Right to Information Law being passed, it means that citizen groups that we have around the country now know they can go to a government institution, and that the information they want is not delivered to them as a privilege, but as a right because they know of the law. We took them through the steps on how to request for that information. For us, having citizens at the forefront of such information requests is the best situation we could imagine.'

As part of the ADISS project, the partnership also works to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to improve their strategies around campaigning for law reform and to increase citizen engagement in the campaigns. In addition to the advocacy and training activities conducted by the project partners, accessible and innovative Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and social media platforms have been developed to empower citizens to report and document corruption and related cases.

‘One of the biggest things that I learned during the Scholarship had to do with character and attitude from the people I interacted with, around Cambridge. Putting more focus on the results and achievements than the number of hours worked has helped me in my current work. Right now, my focus is always the beneficiaries of our projects and what we are delivering to them.’

Since its inception in 2014, the ADISS project has reached **50** districts across the **10** regions of Ghana. A total of **145** civil society organisation representatives have received training on effective parliamentary lobbying and advocacy and **141** of these have received training on using ICT and social media for advocacy. Moreover, at least **9,661** citizens have been engaged through community durbars on the socio-cultural practices that hinder the fight against corruption. In 2017, the platform documented a total of **268** bribery reports from a number of platforms including ‘I Paid A Bribe’ and the Advocacy and Legal Advice Centre (ALAC), which are run by the Ghana Integrity Initiative.

Through the ADISS project, the implementing partners have also been successful in creating awareness on the extent, causes, and impact of corruption in Ghana through conducting research and publishing evidence-based reports and policy briefs. As a monitoring and evaluation specialist, Bright has played a key role in this work and produced various reports and briefings related to the implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Action Plan (See information box on page 5). Bright’s contribution to the fight against corruption has been widely recognised and he has contributed to discussions on the topic as a panel member and moderator at events organised by the African Union and the International Republican Institute (IRI). He has also undertaken several anti-corruption consultations for ERGO, a New York consultancy firm.

To further build on the skills honed during his Commonwealth Scholarship, Bright trained as a Mandela Washington Fellow in the United States of

America under the Young Africa Leadership Initiative (YALI) and received further funds from YAAS (YALI Alumni Action Strategy) and the US Embassy in Ghana to undertake a project on anti-corruption in education, targeting tertiary institutions. He is currently designing an online education platform on anti-corruption for young leaders, also funded by YAAS and the US Embassy.

Effective Implementation of the Ghana Anti-Corruption Action Plan

In its fight against corruption, Ghana is guided by the National Anti-Corruption Action Plan (NACAP) which was operationalised in 2015 and spans a ten-year period (2015-2024). The plan provides the scope for collective efforts to fight against corruption and places emphasis on building public capacity to condemn and report corruption. It also strives to improve efficiency, accountability, and transparency in public and private institutions, and offers guidance on conducting effective investigations and prosecution of corrupt conduct.

As a monitoring and evaluation specialist, Bright is a member of Ghana’s National Monitoring Committee (MoniCom) under the National Anti-Corruption Action Plan (NACAP). In 2019 and 2020, he led research activities to assess the extent to which the plan had been implemented to date, identifying achievements that had been made, and areas that required more attention to effectively fight against corruption. Among other findings, the study revealed that while most organisations who participated in the survey were able to implement their activities to fight corruption, they encountered challenges such as limited funding, lack of monitoring, low political buy-in and a lack of awareness of the NACAP from top-management in some organisations.

‘I said to the team, we can no longer keep demanding that institutions implement the National Anti-Corruption Action Plan. Let’s cross over to them [the institutions] and find out what their challenges are and get as many activities done as possible.’

In 2019, Bright and his research team authored and published a progress report on the ‘Implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Action Plan (NACAP) at Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies,’ and an accompanying policy brief entitled: Making the National Anti-Corruption Action Plan Work. This brief includes concrete recommendations for the effective implementation of the plan, including a call for more commitment from the government to reinforce the plan in public institutions, internalisation of the plan by the implementing partners (to address a lack of funding), and an increase in awareness creation programmes.

I Paid A Bribe: Tackling Reported Corrupt Activities in Ghana

One key element of the ADISS project is to increase reporting of corruption, follow up on those reports, and resolve the issues raised. To achieve this, the ADISS partners created electronic platforms, such as 'I Paid A Bribe' where citizens can register and report any bribes they have been asked to pay, or where they have been a victim of, or witnessed corruption. This information is used to tackle corruption by supporting law enforcement, tightening regulation, and improving governance systems and procedures, thereby reducing the scope of corruption in obtaining services from the government and the private sector.

Through this platform, Bright and colleagues have been able to resolve reported cases of corruption. This includes a case where a group of farmers (consisting of 25 families) in the eastern part of Ghana reported having been displaced by the Ghana Oil Development Company without receiving a full compensation for their land, which was a source of their livelihood. Upon receiving this report, GACC investigated the case and established that the farmers' lawyer had received the money on their behalf from the oil company but not passed it on to them. GACC retrieved the money from the farmers' lawyer and the farmers were paid what was due to them. Narrating the implications of resolving this case for the farmers, the Commonwealth Alumnus said:

'For some of them (the farmers), it meant they could now rent a place to stay, they could move on to other lands to continue with their livelihood, and they could take their children to school.'

Investigating Government Expenditure on Community Development Projects

Bright has worked with citizen groups to monitor local government expenditure on community projects. Using an example of one incident where GACC investigated government expenditure on local community projects, Bright demonstrated the positive impact of his work in fighting corruption and supporting accountability and transparency in the governance of the country. The anti-corruption team was alerted by a citizen group that a school project was not being implemented despite funds being disbursed and a contractor paid by the local government. The value of collaboration, one of the skills honed on his Scholarship, was highlighted by Bright as a key element that has contributed to his success in tackling anti-corruption in Ghana.



'While you're in a development studies programme, the stuff you pick up, it's just so much, and a lot of it was happening unconsciously. There was always emphasis on group work as compared to individual work. And being in the field now, I have realised that indeed, most of the things you do, you need to be able to work in groups, collaborate with others. That ability to be patient, to accept the pace of the group as opposed to your own pace of work and critically consider all views has become an asset.'

Alongside their investigation to establish why the community school had not been built, despite the funds having been allocated by the government, and to uncover who was responsible for this unacceptable corruption, Bright and colleagues conducted a press conference to raise awareness of the incident. The success of this intervention was described by Bright as follows:

'Probably that was the fastest school ever built in Ghana because it was built in four months. Through the intervention, it meant that the village have a school that their children were now able to access. Where they were located was very remote and they were quite far from the nearest school. And children were walking several miles to be able to attend school. Following the incident, the citizens groups have become quite close with their local government, which now relies on them to give feedback on local projects, and engage them in planning, and monitoring of development projects being undertaken by the local government.'

As part of the investigations and research conducted on government expenditure, the Commonwealth Alumnus and his colleagues have also scrutinised the health sector and their findings have revealed that citizens were not getting value for money paid in exchange for access to some healthcare services.

Following this discovery, Bright led the implementation of advocacy activities targeted at the Ministries of Education and Health to create awareness around the detrimental impact of corrupt activities on citizens' health and livelihoods.

'One of the results that came out of the investigations was that the health service providers were mandated to respect the rights and responsibilities of citizens coming to the hospital and display how much the services costs so that people will not be hooked into paying for services that should be provided free of charge, for instance providing snake serum to treat snake bites. Citizens were paying for this.'

Reflecting on his anti-corruption work in Ghana, Bright highlighted his impact as follows:

'I feel proud to have contributed to influencing change in my community. To activate people's agency for them to realise that government essentially means them [the community]. And things will only change if the community are willing to take a step and become part of the solution. We have empowered, educated, and trained citizen groups and shared with them evidence from other communities that have done something [challenged the government] and achieved results.'

Scaling up the Anti-Corruption Campaign to Other Countries

Ghana is only one, among many countries facing endemic corruption, a disease that has crippled socio-economic development and negatively affected people's livelihoods in countries around the world. Bright is currently overseeing 12 projects in procurement, service delivery, audit recommendation implementation and infrastructure which are being implemented in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Benin. As part of this work, the auditor generals of the various participating countries audit their government institutions' expenditure, and where there are issues regarding funds that are unaccounted for or missing, Bright (on behalf of GACC) monitors corrective measures taken by the institutions to retrieve these funds and strengthen their financial management systems.

'I'll remain in the field of governance because I believe the African continent has a lot of resources, but the challenge is for the leadership to use those resources for the benefit of the people. That will remain an area where I'm contributing towards, making leaders account for their stewardship. I'm contributing to making a difference in the lives of other people. When you study development, that is your dream.'

As a change agent, Bright is determined to continue contributing to the development of his country and beyond.

More about Bright Kwadwo Sowu's work

<https://infrastructuretransparency.org/news/cost-sekondi-takoradi-releases-scoping-study-to-help-further-transparency-across-ghana/>

<https://uncaccoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/Final UNCAC-Parallel-Report-on-Ghana.pdf>

<http://www.gaccgh.org/publications/Policy%20brief NACAP%20Implementation%20at%20MMDA.pdf>

http://www.gaccgh.org/publications/NACAP%20Survey%20Report_July,%2020192.pdf

<http://www.gaccgh.org/publications/Report%20on%20State%20of%20Implementation%20of%20NACAP%20at%20MMDA.pdf>

<http://www.gaccgh.org/publications/ADISS%20Issue%20Paper.pdf>

<http://www.gaccgh.org/publications/GII%20Consolidated%20WEB.pdf>

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