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Profile in Public Integrity:

Sam Koim

Investigation Task-Force Sweep Papua New Guinea



Sam Koim currently serves in Papua New Guinea as Chairman of the Investigation Task-Force Sweep (ITFS) and as Principal Legal Officer at the Department of Justice and Attorney General. ITFS is an inter-agency team that brings together the Police Force, Public Prosecutor's Office, Internal Revenue Commission, and Auditor General's Office amongst others, to root out corruption nationwide.

ITFS was established in 2011 to pursue allegations of corruption in the disbursement of national development funds. Under Koim's leadership, the task force uncovered that over half of the country's development budget between 2009 and 2011 had been illegally diverted. In its first year of operations, ITFS investigations resulted in the [arrest of a former minister and other high-ranking officials](#). The office's effectiveness was praised by watchdogs including [Transparency International](#). Following news of an investigation into the current prime minister, the National Executive Council—which the prime minister chairs—attempted to disband ITFS but was blocked by a [permanent stay order issued by the country's highest court](#). The government then blocked funding to the office.

In 2011, you were tasked with leading Papua New Guinea's new anti-corruption coordinating body, the Investigation Task Force Sweep (ITFS). ITFS is the first of its kind in your country. What are the main obstacles you and your colleagues have faced setting up an anti-corruption task force?

Corruption cases often require collaboration across agency lines. On the one hand, this can minimize duplication and keep costs low. On the other hand, multi-pronged investigations can provoke turf wars over which agency has proper jurisdiction. The Constitution also provides safeguards for certain government agencies, such as the Police and Ombudsman Commission, that can make it difficult for them to work with other agencies without appearing to compromise their independence. This issue was tested in court many times by those implicated in our investigations. However, the courts continued to rule in our favor, accepting our arguments that corruption is an organized crime that requires a joint approach from all angles to defeat.

“ITFS has raised the hopes for Papua New Guineans. Personally, I do not want to see ITFS disappear just because a few individuals in power do not like it.”

The ITFS' original mandate in 2011 was to investigate allegations of corruption and mismanagement in the Department of National Planning and Management. How has the ITFS's role evolved since?

The National Planning Department administers the development budget of the Government, which is where most of the allegations of abuse first arose. After the investigations were successful, the Government widened the scope of the ITFS to investigate other corruption complaints. Many concerned citizens also called for ITFS to look into corruption in other government departments.

Your agency faces severe resource constraints, especially since the government severely cut your budget (including your salary) last year. How have you managed to pursue your work despite these challenges?

It has been difficult and challenging. We have a few committed officers who are devoted to the cause. So much is at stake, including the cases we initiated that are still being litigated in court and need our attention to ensure they do not fall through. Because of this commitment, we are clinging on despite the insurmountable challenges we face. However, we cannot do much in terms of investigating fresh cases. We have registered about 350 cases, out of which about 93 arrests were made.

You are very active on Facebook and Twitter promoting the work of the ITFS. How can an embattled agency like ITFS use social media to promote its aims and manage public expectations?

Advocacy is an integral part of the overall fight against corruption. Papua New Guinea is a difficult country with different cultures, traditions, and norms. We have to advocate the appropriate standards and norms that each and every individual has a role in adopting. Overall, we would like to cause a cultural change and we must employ all the resources and avenues available to us to pursue, advocate for, and support that change. ITFS has raised the hopes for Papua New Guineans. Personally, I do not want to see ITFS disappear just because a few individuals in power do not like it.

CAPI recently had the pleasure of welcoming you to our office in New York City. What can scholars, officials, and international activists do to help practitioners on the front lines of corruption like you?

Corruption is a multi-faceted phenomenon, entrenched in the cultural milieu of each country. It is also a transnational issue—corrupt transactions can be conducted with the click of a computer mouse. More studies should be done on the approaches for both country-specific and coordinated approaches.

Corruption also grows in secrecy. Most practitioners on the front line of combating corruption cannot speak out due to legal limitations, such as restrictions on what prosecutors can tell the media about active investigations. We need scholars, activists, and journalists to expose corruption, beyond the reach of the courtroom.