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Profile in Public Integrity: Marianne Camerer

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Profiles in Public Integrity: Marianne Camerer



Marianne Camerer co-founded [Global Integrity](#), a leading international anti-corruption non-profit. She is the Programme Director of [Building Bridges](#), a new policy-focused research and outreach programme at the [Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice](#) at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. She previously headed anti-corruption research at the [Institute for Security Studies](#), was a founding director of the [Open Democracy Advice Center](#) and lectured in applied ethics at the University of Stellenbosch. Marianne holds a doctorate in Political Studies from the University of Witwatersrand, masters' degrees in public policy and political philosophy from Oxford and the University of Stellenbosch, and was a Yale World Fellow and former fellow of the Yale Council on

African Studies. Marianne trained as an integral coach at the [Centre for Coaching](#) at the Graduate School of Business of the University of Cape Town.

How did you first become interested in corruption? Did your experience growing up in South Africa play a role?

When I came back to South Africa in 1995, having completed a two year Masters of Philosophy degree at Oxford on victim's rights, I started working at the Institute for Security Studies. Initially I was focused on street crime, and then on white-collar crime and intersections between criminal activity and the public sector. Corruption was a relatively new field of study and was not a particularly popular focus in the new South Africa.

I grew up in a political family and the mantra "all politicians are corrupt" was certainly not my experience. On the other hand, if corruption is defined as an abuse of power, then apartheid South Africa was inherently corrupt, and my interest in anti-corruption research and activism post-1994 was to ensure that the new regime did not continue the abuses of power that characterised the apartheid state but rather allowed our constitutional commitments towards openness, accountability and transparency to prevail at all levels of state.

How did Global Integrity start?

You can read “Our Story” on the Global Integrity website (www.globalintegrity.org). It was largely based on conversations between co-founders Chuck Lewis, Nathaniel Heller, and myself on the question of whether corruption could be understood and measured in a more real and useful way than what was then available.

Using investigative journalism techniques and policy research skills we felt we could paint a textured picture of corruption—and more importantly anti-corruption measures—potentially useful to both political activists and change-makers. We contracted with in-country experts (both scholars and journalists) to conduct independent research and interviews. Whilst there are nearly 350 individually coded indicators to “measure” public integrity, the three big framing questions for developing the Global Integrity Report (which covers over 100 countries) are: (1) What systems, policies and laws are in place to prevent abuses of power? (2) Are they working in practice? And, (3) Are they accessible to citizens? Asking questions and forcing accountable officials to answer them is an important part of the research that we do.

Data collection and analysis seem central to Global Integrity’s work. How can better data help those fighting corruption?

Those committed to fighting corruption have an uphill battle. The stakes are high, and those who benefit from the status quo have little incentive to change. There are key moments when change can occur that need to be exploited. Having credible data from an independent source on what anti-corruption measures are or are not in place helps to pinpoint the most important challenges. The discussion can then focus on specifics, such as conflict of interest provisions for judicial officers or disclosure requirements for political party funding. A sharper toolkit enables a more focused and productive conversation, instead of unhelpful finger-pointing.

What are the most important things your work has taught you about corruption?

The battle is never won as long as money and power intersect. The best one can do is focus on strengthening the institutional mechanisms. In South Africa, those are our Chapter Nine institutions such as the Auditor General and the Office of the Public Protector. Individual leaders matter. The quality of leadership can determine whether an institution fulfils its mandate, despite inevitable resource constraints.

Any anti-corruption effort also needs a range of stakeholders with influence, both internal and external, to maintain pressure and oversight to uphold the public interest. The media and civil society can keep those in power mindful of whose interests they are meant to serve. The international community can also be a cautionary influence on some corrupt leaders. A criminal justice system that functions effectively, with independence and public trust, is crucial to ensure that justice prevails.

What do you think is the greatest obstacle currently facing the public integrity community?

Now that public integrity issues are squarely on the agenda, how can the public integrity community hold the public's imagination and prevent cynicism from setting in? Once again, a country needs a functioning criminal justice system that operates without fear and favour alongside an independent media that is able to shine a light on abuse.

Unfortunately I have a sense that citizens are cynical about the anti-corruption rhetoric that informs most election campaigns, whether in New York or New Delhi. People want to believe in change, but become discouraged when they see that not much changes. They may then give up on the formal political system and either stop reporting crimes or take the law into their own hands.

This cynicism is challenged when citizens see the courage of individuals such as South Africa's Public Protector, Advocate Thuli Madonsela, who despite threats and insults continues to do her duty and fulfil the mandate of her office namely to conduct independent investigations into the activities of the highest office bearers in the land.

How has your interdisciplinary background, as an activist and an academic researcher, influenced your thinking?

The work I am doing now at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice is to build bridges between political stakeholders and research experts around what we are calling "wicked problems" that affect the continent. Both of these communities can learn from each other, given a neutral space and resources (such as case studies) where they can share practical expertise. Being able to speak the languages of both academia and advocacy has helped me to bridge some of the barriers—being married to a philosopher also helps! But there is a lot of work to be done to build trust and bring more communities to the table.

As a member of CAPI's advisory board, what contributions do you envision CAPI making to the public integrity field?

CAPI can bring together different communities of practitioners and academics into the independent space provided by a university. It can create a learning environment for experimentation with new ideas and through its activities enable a rich exchange of international, regional and local perspectives. Ultimately, local government corruption is a universal issue.