THE CENTER TO COMBAT CORRUPTION AND CRONYISM

# Empowering Youths Across Southeast Asia:

## Major Corruption Red Flags & How to Spot Them

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The Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism (C4 Center)

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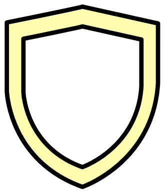
# What is Corruption?

There is no singly agreed upon definition of corruption in the world. This is because "corruption" is able to manifest in many distinct, separate, and complex forms.

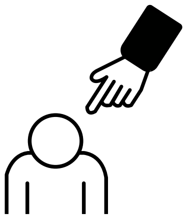
Transparency International broadly defines this phenomenon as:

**" The abuse of entrusted power for private gain. "[1]**

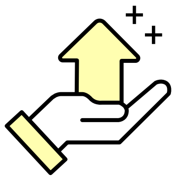
On the other hand, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) refrains from providing a single definition of corruption. Instead they identify three key elements that are usually identified in a corrupt act[2], namely:



Authority



Abuse



Benefit

[1] Transparency International, What is Corruption? available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption>

[2] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Taking action against corruption: A Step-by-Step Guide by Youth for Youth (2024), available at <https://grace.unodc.org/grace/uploads/documents/Youthled_toolkit-optimized.pdf>, p.5

Further, instead of providing a singular definition of corruption the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), chooses to identify specific acts of corruption that should be deemed as “offences”:

| Types of Corruption[3] | General Definition |
|---|---|
| **Bribery** | The solicitation, offering or acceptance of anything of value in exchange for official action that benefits the briber. |
| **Embezzlement** | When a person entrusted with funds or assets misuses it for personal benefit. |
| **Abuse of functions/power** | When an individual exploits power or positions of authority to improperly benefit. |
| **Trading in influence** | When someone uses their personal connections, position, or influence to benefit others in exchange for personal gain. |
| **Illicit enrichment** | When a person enjoys wealth that cannot be justified as coming from a legitimate source of income. |
| **Money laundering & Concealment** | The process of illegally concealing the origin of money obtained from illicit activities. |
| **Obstruction of justice** | An attempt to impede justice by influencing or directly obstructing investigations, prosecutions, and action taken against corrupt activities. |

Corruption, therefore, cannot simply be defined in narrow and simple terms. Understanding that corruption is far more complex and nuanced than simple “bribery” is an important first step in recognising how it can manifest across many parts of our lives. When we limit our perspective of corruption, we risk overlooking the ways power is abused through other means such as favouritism, abuse of power, or other forms of wrongdoing. Recognising this complexity matters because it allows us to broaden our perspectives on the issue of corruption, and allows us to tailor solutions that adequately addresses corruption beyond individual culpability.

[3] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, About corruption, available at <https://www.unodc.org/corruption/en/learn/what-is-corruption.html>

# Background

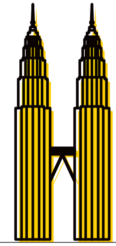
Though oftentimes perceived as purely an abstract problem, corruption is a daily reality that has untold impacts on the future of young people across Southeast Asia.

As highlighted by UNODC:

> "...corruption has been found to **distort human judgement, warp the organizational cultures of business and government institutions, undermine economic and political development, increase poverty, compromise human rights, corrode the integrity of economic and political systems,** cause **extreme inequalities, destroy public confidence** in government and markets, and **undercut environmental protection** and climate change policies."

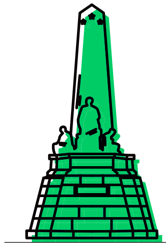
UNODC
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

In Malaysia, the National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2024-2028 (NACS) estimates the cumulative loss of Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) to be around MYR277 billion (around USD70 billion) between 2019 to 2023.



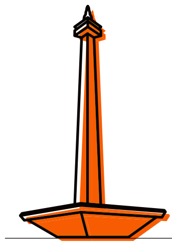
**~USD70** billion
loss due to corruption

Similarly, in the Philippines, Deputy Ombudsman Cyril Ramos stated in 2019 that corruption "eats up" around USD13.35 billion in the country, equivalent to 20% of the Philippines annual budget.



**~USD13.35** billion
loss due to corruption

Parallel to this, the Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW), estimates potential state losses due to corruption cases in Indonesia at IDR28.4 trillion (around USD1.7 billion) in 2023.



**~USD1.7** billion
loss due to corruption

Yet these figures only tell part of the story.

The cost of corruption is staggering, and while the economic ramifications appear vast, the human impact is even starker. Ultimately, the true burden falls disproportionately on the underprivileged: those who rely most on public systems for education, healthcare, housing, and social protection.

Corruption – by diverting funds and perpetuating unfair practices – widens inequality, limits social mobility, and entrenches cycles of poverty. For youths, who are rarely party to this system of elite corruption, severe and, oftentimes, unassailable barriers impede entry into opportunities, institutions, and decision-making spaces that should otherwise be accessible based on merit, fairness, and equal chance.

Despite its scale, corruption is not unbeatable. Across the region, citizens – particularly the youth – have played a powerful role in challenging entrenched systems.

These examples show that change is possible, and that the youth can become a vital force in protecting integrity and fighting for change that helps shape a fairer future. By understanding how corruption operates, and how to recognise its warning signs, the youth can work towards building a more transparent and accountable society.

**>> In Bangladesh & Nepal**

Youth movements have upended what were thought to be infallible political and elite establishments, through fearless demand for accountability and reform.

**>> In Indonesia & Timor-Leste**

Widespread youth mobilisation successfully pushed back against the passage of highly controversial legislation that sought to further embed perceived inequalities.

# About This Toolkit:

Corruption can often feel complex, hidden, and difficult to confront, particularly for young people navigating systems where power and influence are unevenly distributed. This toolkit equips youths across Southeast Asia with the knowledge and practical skills to recognise and respond to corruption in their everyday lives. At its heart, this toolkit aims to provide clear and accessible ways to **identify corruption red flags**, it seeks to demystify how corruption operates, while providing an **entry point for meaningful engagement and action.**

Drawing from the Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism's (C4 Center) extensive work researching corruption and governance issues in Malaysia – alongside prominent case studies from across Southeast Asia – this toolkit highlights **patterns, warning signs, and recurring practices that enable corruption** to persist. Ranging from conflicts of interest to abuse of power and opaque decision-making, it offers insights and practical examples to help youths better understand how corruption manifests within society.

At its core, this toolkit is designed not merely to inform, but to empower youths across the region. It hopes to encourage the youth to move toward action – whether through advocacy, community engagement, or widescale mobilisation. By equipping youths with information, it seeks to strengthen their confidence to question, challenge, and resist corrupt practices. In doing so, it supports a growing generation determined to stand against corruption, and to shape a more transparent, accountable, and equitable future for the region.

About Us:

# Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism

The Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism (C4 Center) is a leading Malaysian civil society organisation dedicated to strengthening integrity, transparency, and accountability in public governance, operating at both national and regional levels.

C4 Center is recognised for its rigorous, evidence-based research and policy analysis, which underpin its advocacy to shape public discourse, influence institutional reform, and promote meaningful citizen participation in governance. Its work is driven by a multidisciplinary team of investigative researchers, legal professionals, and experienced private-sector practitioners, and guided by a Board comprising respected figures in anti-corruption and governance who provide strategic direction and institutional credibility.

Committed to inclusive and gender-responsive programming, C4 Center integrates gender considerations across its work and prioritises balanced representation. The organisation actively engages a wide range of stakeholders—including youth, public officials, private-sector actors, government-linked companies (GLCs), indigenous communities, environmental advocates, and residential community groups—to ensure that anti-corruption and governance reforms are grounded, participatory, and socially responsive.

Guided by the principles of CLEAN, COMPETENT, CONSCIOUS, and CREDIBLE governance, C4 Center is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit organisation. Its mission is to foster open government policies at the national, state, and local levels, primarily through public sector reform and strengthened citizenship governance.

Corruption Red Flags:

# What are they & How to spot them?

**01** Conflicts of interest in decision-making processes

**02** Lack of access to information

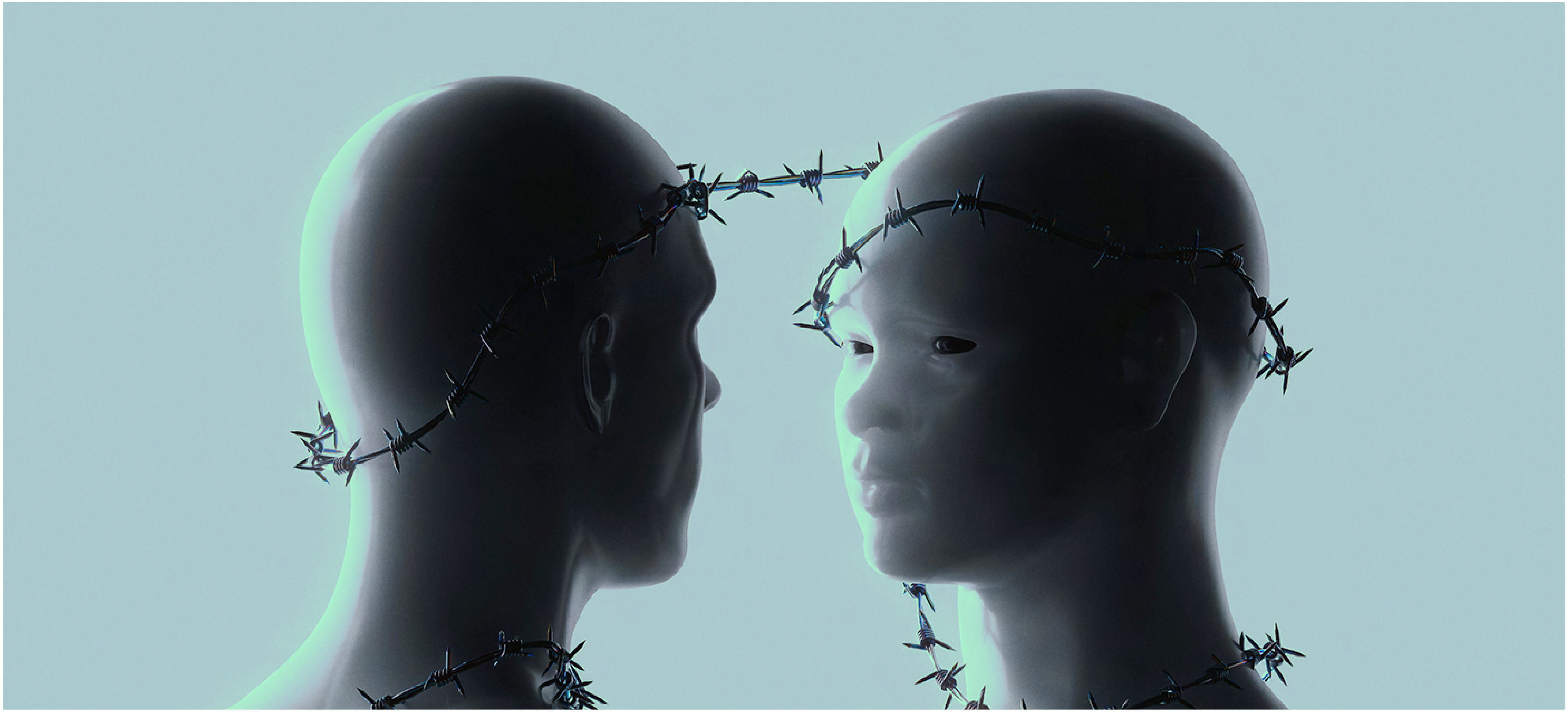
**03** Policies or legislations that benefit a few

**04** “White elephant” mega projects

**05** Sudden wealth accumulation by elected representatives and public officials

**06** Large scandals with little accountability

**07** A lack of complaints or reporting channels



# Conflicts of interest in decision-making processes

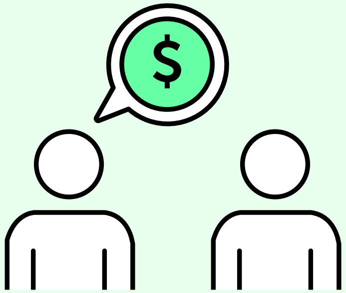
1st Red Flag:

# Conflicts of interest in decision-making processes

A conflict of interest occurs when a person has **multiple competing interests that clash with one another.** These competing interests create the risk that an individual's judgement or actions are **unduly influenced.**

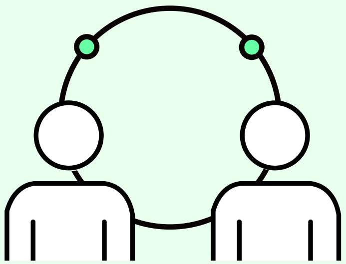
## Breaking down conflicts of interest

"Interests" can exist in many different forms, including but not limited to:



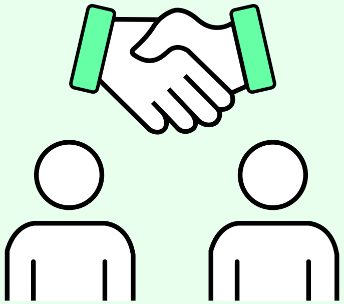
### Financial Interests

Anything of material value owned by an individual that has the potential for financial gain or loss (e.g. owning shares in a company)



### Relational Interest

Personal relationships that are held by an individual (e.g. family, friends, etc.)



### Political Interest

Possessing any political affiliations or subscribing to a particular political ideology (e.g. being a member of a political party)

## How can it occur?

To understand how a conflict of interest can occur, the following concepts have to be made clear:

### Official Responsibility

The **professional capacity** that an individual is responsible for (e.g. an officer of the anti-corruption agency)

### Competing Interest

An **interest that directly conflicts** with an individual's official responsibility (e.g. the officer holds shares in a company accused of corruption)

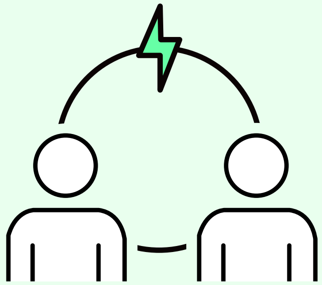
### Decision-making Ability

The ability for an individual's official responsibility to **affect the outcome** of their competing interest (e.g. misleading/deterring investigations against the company)

It is important to emphasise that a conflict of interest does not only involve a clash between an individual's private interest and their professional obligations, but can manifest even between two professional responsibilities, (see more in case studies).

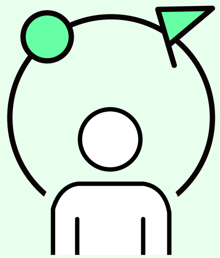
## Form of Conflict of Interest

Conflicts of interest can be further broken down into two forms:



### Real Conflicts of Interest

When a clash of interests **directly affects** the way an individual performs their professional duties



### Apparent Conflicts of Interest

When there is a **reasonable belief** that an individual holds two conflicting interests, even if the interest does not necessarily affect decision-making

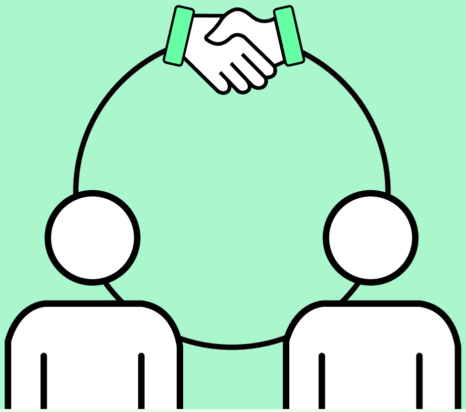
Therefore, a conflict of interest does not reflect a moral failing committed by an individual, rather it is an objective fact. Whether or not an individual is affected by a conflict, **it exists**, and is perceived to have an impact on their ability to act within their professional capacity.

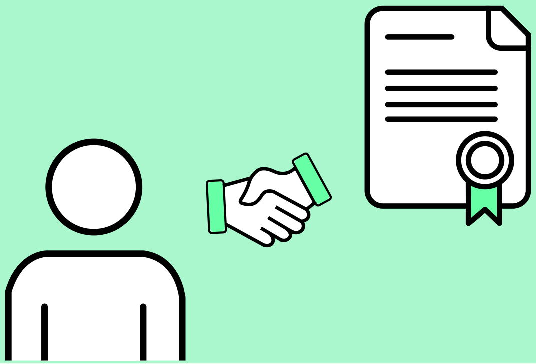
# Red flags to look out for

Conflicts of interest have the potential to be most damaging in major public projects. Therefore, it is important to look out for the following red flags, which may signal conflicts of interest:

### Individuals that share surnames or known relations with decision-makers

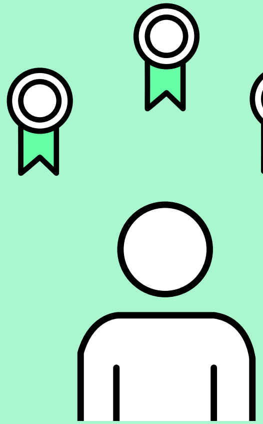
A shared surname or a known familial relationship between an elected representative or public official and a contractor/ developer/ supplier suggests a potential personal tie that could bias decisions or create opportunities for preferential treatment. If the involved company is owned by an individual with known ties to a key decision-maker, this may be another indicator of a conflict of interest.





### Newly-incorporated companies being awarded contracts

A company formed shortly before winning a large public contract may be a vehicle created to channel benefits to insiders, hide beneficiaries, or bypass competitive procurement. Alternatively, the company could be one that has no track record of providing services or goods in a related field.

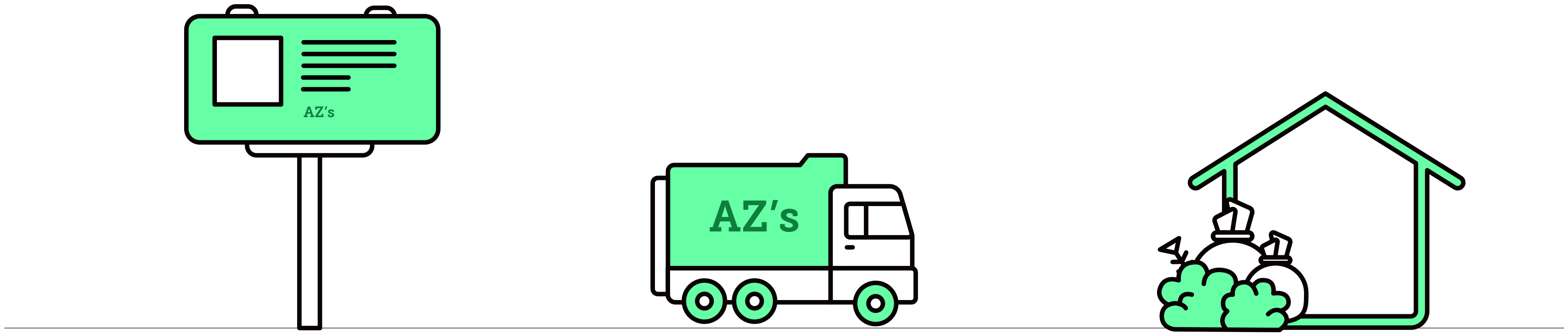


### Repeated awards to the same supplier despite poor performance

Continuing to award contracts to a poorly performing supplier/contractor/vendor suggests clear favouritism. This is the case when multiple contracts or extensions are given to a firm that has a clear history of delays, complaints, or penalties for poor performance.

## Examples in everyday life

### Scenario 1




You read a local news article about a new municipal waste-management contract awarded to a private company. Over the next week you notice branded trucks from that company operating in your neighbourhood and a new billboard advertising the contract. A quick search of the company's website shows that the company's Chief Executive Officer shares the same surname as a local politician, who is involved in the city council.

Over time, you notice how the waste in your neighbourhood is being mismanaged – collection rarely arrives on time and it appears that there are not enough trucks to service the entire area. You notice how waste slowly begins to pile up without a regular, consistent waste collection schedule. Pests such as rats, cockroaches, and flies become common sights around the waste disposal bin outside your house, while rainfall ensures that waste scraps litter your streets regularly.

In this scenario, a conflict of interest inevitably caused the degradation of public service quality. Here, the ability for a public service to be delivered in an efficient and effective manner was ignored in favour of personal interest. Ultimately, local residents are made to bear the brunt of this public service failure, while the company – and presumably the politician – are able to enrich themselves.

# Why does this matter?

As mentioned, conflicts of interest have the potential to directly influence the way an individual acts or makes judgements. In government, conflicts of interest risk undermining public interest in favour of an individual's personal gain. These conflicts have the risk of directly or indirectly affecting many people.

Ultimately, conflicts of interest allow unfair advantages to exist as they allow for decision-making to prioritise connections over merit. Conflicts of interest can evolve into more widespread and harmful forms of corruption, manifesting in different ways – such as nepotism, cronyism, political patronage, and general favouritism.


# Lack of access to information

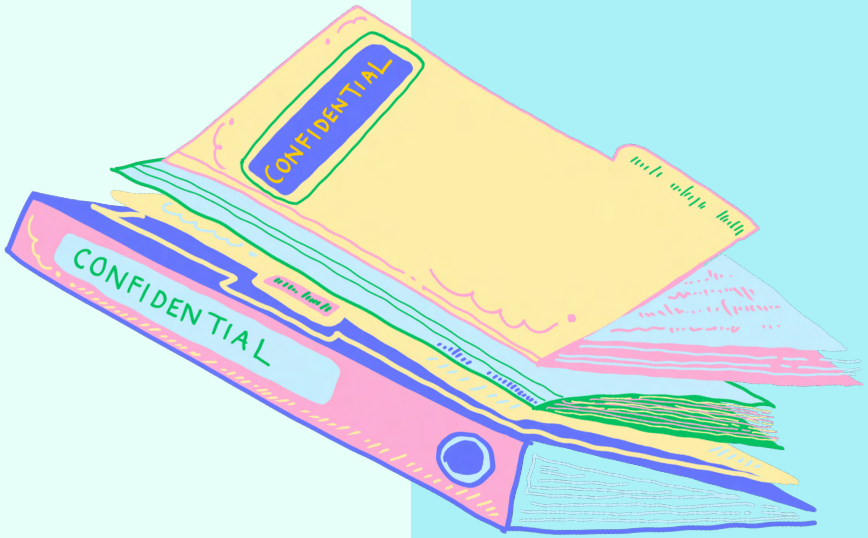
# 2nd Red Flag:
# Lack of access to information

Access to information allows the public to **seek, receive, and impart information** held by governments. However, access to information is often not facilitated by governments, rather **transparency and openness are deliberately obstructed.**

## Explaining access to information

Proper access to information means **all public information is open by default,** unless a justifiable reason for non-disclosure is proved. To be "open by default" essentially means that all public information and data is fully accessible to the public "by default". In other words, **government information and data is accessible, clearly communicated, and usable without restriction** – members of the public who request access to information need not provide reasons or purpose in order to receive it.

This is contrasted with how many governments traditionally operate. Typically, governments view themselves as the **"gatekeepers" of information,** taking on a "closed by default" approach. In this approach, information **belongs to the government, not the public,** where information is only published voluntarily. In a "closed by default" regime, government officials have wide discretion to **deny or delay access to information,** forcing members of the public to rely on formal – oftentimes unsuccessful – requests.



# Key principles of Open Information

For information to be truly "open by default", the following key principles must be present:

## The government must proactively disclose information

Instead of waiting for requests to pour in, the government must make an active effort to **regularly and automatically publish public information.** Access must be **built into the system,** rather than depend on individual effort by the public. This is an important step in **removing barriers to access** as it allows all individuals to have **equal access to data and information.** This is in contrast to a "closed by default" system wherein only individuals who make requests are granted information.

## Information must be in accessible formats

The government cannot simply publish information, it must do so in a format that is **clear, accessible, and understandable** for members of the public. Members of the public must not be made to sift through endless pages of documentation to access desired information. Rather, information must be made **well-organised and accessible** via multiple formats. Additionally, procedures to obtain information must be **simple, timely, and affordable or even free.** What is the use in allowing citizens access to information, if there are unnecessary barriers that reduce their accessibility?

## The government acts merely as "custodians" of information

Under an "open by default" the government **does not own public information,** rather, they merely **manage information on the behalf of the public.** Ultimately, information is generated using public resources, while oftentimes, data managed by the government comes from the public themselves. Therefore, the government's role should be limited to **storing, protecting, and distributing** information.

In an "open by default" system, disclosures can only be prevented if the government has **legitimate grounds to withhold information,** such as for national security, defence, privacy and personal data protection, international trade, and law enforcement issues, among others.

If proper access to information is in place, the public will have the ability to access and request information on:

## The use of public funds

Allows the public to **detect misuse, overspending, misallocation or embezzlement** (e.g. breakdowns on public expenditure and budgeting)

## Government contracts and procurements

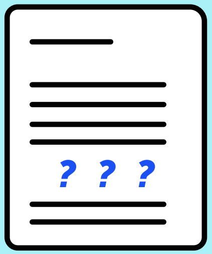
Prevents decision-makers from **acting based on favouritism, bribery, and unfair contract awards** (e.g. company qualifications are made clear)

## Government decision-making processes

Allows the public to know **how the government makes important decisions** (e.g. policy documents and research paper)

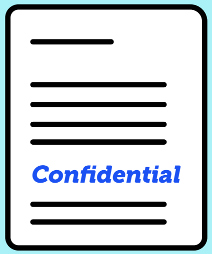
# Red flags to look out for

Corruption thrives in secrecy. Hence, when information transparency is missing, it may be an indicator that the people in power are **deliberately obfuscating information to hide corrupt practices.** The following are potential indicators of how corruption is hidden by a lack of access to information:




### Information is incomplete or vague

An easy way to avoid public scrutiny into potential corruption is by deliberately leaving out information that could signal potential wrongdoing. A key example of this would be **failure to publish budgets with fully detailed breakdowns** in expenditure. By leaving out these details, the public are left in the dark as to how large allocations of funds are utilised, and whether their assigned expenditure is truly utilised for intended purposes.




### Obstructions in sharing information

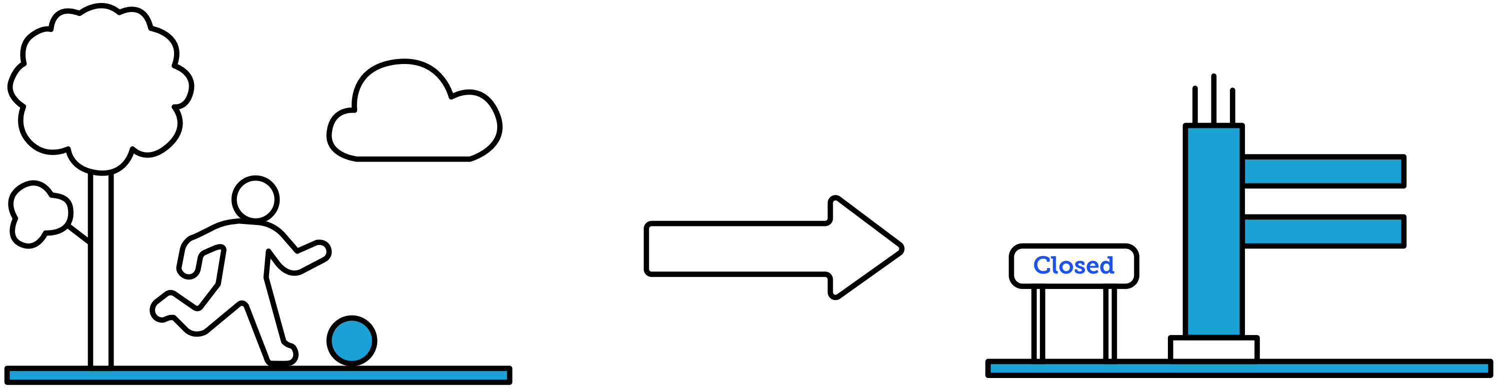
Government officials may deliberately withhold information to **prevent the public from viewing how or why certain decisions were made**, particularly when those decisions may fail to withstand scrutiny. In certain instances, government officials may **unjustly classify documents or key information as "confidential"** when requested to conceal wrongdoing. For instance, the details of the selection process for a government contract are labelled "confidential" after the project is announced


### Restricted access to decision-making processes

When government officials make important decisions, access to information is crucial to ascertain **whether these decisions are sound, reasonable, and** are made through **fair judgement.** If the government is unwilling to provide detailed explanations as to **how decisions were made,** suspicions are raised. For example, if the government awards a multimillion mega project to an inexperienced company without publishing the **reasons and justifications for selecting them,** there is a possibility that corruption is involved.

# Examples in everyday life

## Scenario 2




On your way home you notice the public park where you grew up playing has been closed. A printed notice on the gate states the land was sold, but offers no further explanation. Weeks later a towering billboard appears where the swings once stood, advertising a luxury condominium to be built on this site. You soon discover that the government had sold off the plot of land to a major developer, without consulting local residents.

In this scenario, a lack of access to information allowed a public park to be bulldozed without prior knowledge. Instead of being active in protesting and resisting against the demolition of an important community area, residents were left in the dark and were, therefore, unable to mobilise in time to preserve their community space.

# Why does this matter?

Access to information is critical in preventing corruption as it **reduces secrecy, increases scrutiny and accountability, and empowers the public with knowledge** of the government's actions. Through openness and transparency, the public is made aware of how the government makes decisions and how they utilise resources.

If government officials and politicians are aware that their **actions and decisions are open to public scrutiny,** they are **less likely to engage in corrupt practices.** The risk of being exposed is a powerful deterrent. It is well-known that corruption thrives in secrecy, and it is within a corrupt actor's best interest to hide or obfuscate information.

Moreover, information transparency works towards **better governance and management of public resources.** As the government's decisions are far more visible, government officials are more likely to **follow the correct procedures and prioritise public interest,** fearing public scrutiny for mismanagement.

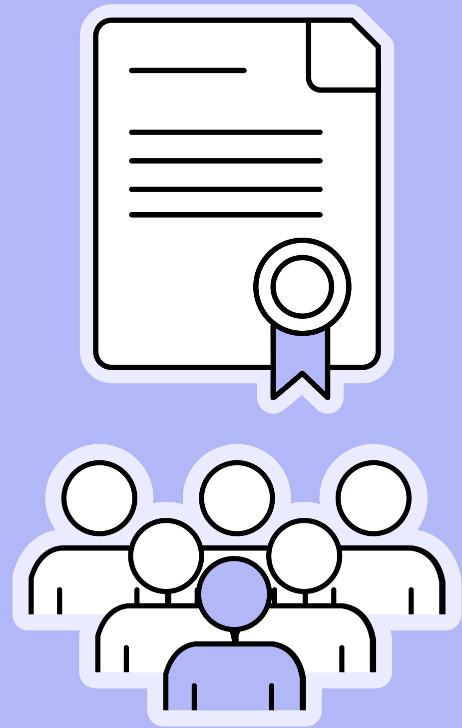
In a worst case scenario, access to information allows the public to **openly identify patterns of corruption.** Should the government be mandated to publish information publicly, suspicious activity can be more easily flagged by members of the public and civil society – repeated awards to the same firm and unexplained policy changes become more easily searchable.

Ultimately, access to information **builds public trust and strengthens the credibility of the government.** Members of the public are more likely to believe in and trust public institutions, if they act openly and transparently.

# Policies or legislations that benefit a few

3rd Red Flag:

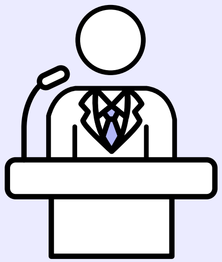
# Policies or legislation that benefit a few



"Policies or legislation that benefit a few" refers to situations where laws, policies, or regulations are designed – intentionally or indirectly – **only to benefit a small group of individuals,** rather than serving the broader public interest. This small group of elite, well-connected individuals can come in the form of **political allies, wealthy industrialists, or corporate figures.**

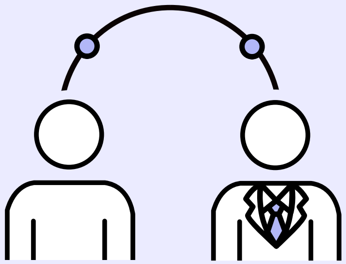
## Expanding on the concept

Who are the beneficiaries of such policies?



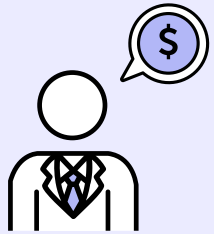
### Politicians in power

**Government ministers or elected representatives,** who have **legal and political power** to institute policies or laws that benefit them personally



### Politically connected individuals

**Family members, close associates, or political allies** of politicians in power, who are typically involved in business or a particular industry



### Large corporations or business elites

**Major corporations or businesspersons** who have **significant financial influence** to "lobby" lawmakers and policymakers

## What is “Lobbying”

“Lobbying” refers to a form of advocacy that **attempts to influence policy decisions** made by legislators/politicians, members of government agencies, or powerful decisionmakers in government. Lobbying involves attempts to **directly push for or against specific legislations, policies, or regulations.** This manifests in lobbyists **establishing direct contact with lawmakers, policymakers, or their staff** to try and convince them to support a specific policy stance.

Although not necessarily “wrong” or illegal, lobbying can devolve into **bribes, favours, or other corrupt practices** as elite networks attempt to **improperly sway policymaking in their favour.** This has been particularly noted in instances where lobbying is carried out by **major corporations and multinational companies,** due to their tremendous financial power.

Policies or legislations that are “favourable” to this elite network of individuals can:

**>> Provide special advantages, exemptions, or protections**

**>> Reduce competition and rewards based on merit**

Ultimately, this results in a phenomenon called “policy capture”, where decisions over policies are repeatedly directed **away from public interest to benefit a small group of individuals.** This occurs when powerful actors exert sustained influence over how **laws, regulations, and policies are established and enforced,** so that outcomes **consistently favour the interests of this elite network.**

# Red flags to look out for

It may be difficult to accurately identify when a law or a policy is intended to serve a specific group of private interests. However, a few important elements to look out for are as follows:

### Sudden and rushed changes

A law or policy that is introduced suddenly and pushed through with haste is a clear warning sign. Rushed legislation typically leaves **little time for meaningful scrutiny** by the public, experts, or civil society, ultimately excluding them from the decision-making process.

### Lack of evidence of public benefit

If a government cannot furnish **clear, verifiable evidence** that a new law or policy will deliver tangible public benefits, it should be treated as a serious red flag. Policies enacted without published data and statistics, cost-benefit analyses, or independent impact assessments create space for hidden objectives.

### Closed-door consultation process

Consultations that are **brief, poorly publicised, or limited** to a select group of stakeholders should also raise suspicion. When feedback from public consultations is not published or when meetings are held behind closed doors, there is no way to verify whose views shaped the policy or whether public concerns were addressed.

### Vague or discretionary language

Laws that vest broad, discretionary powers in a single official or office are another indicator. Terms such as “at the minister’s discretion” or poorly defined criteria grant decision-makers wide latitude to make decisions without accountability. This excessive discretion can be exploited for favouritism, selective approvals, and appointments made for private gain.

Therefore, when a new policy proposal or piece of legislation is announced by the government, it is crucial that the following questions are asked and answered satisfactorily:

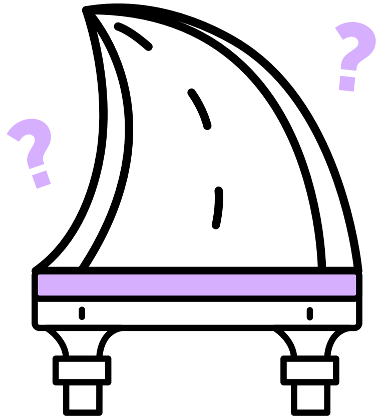
“Who benefits from this?”

“How was this decision made?”

“Why do we need this law/policy?”

## Examples in everyday life

### Scenario 3

You come across a piece of news announcing a new law passed by Parliament to "accelerate economic growth" through Strategic Investment Zones or Special Economic Zones. The law grants long tax holidays, relaxed environmental rules, and fast-track approvals for projects inside designated zones. Within weeks you notice major infrastructure budgets reallocated to build highways and utilities that connect a handful of sites situated within these designated zones. Additionally, news reports show how many foreign firms are beginning to set up offices in these special zones after pledging to invest billions into the developments of these zones. You later discover from investigative reporting that this law was drafted in seemingly record time, with only closed-door sessions with "key stakeholders" having taken place.

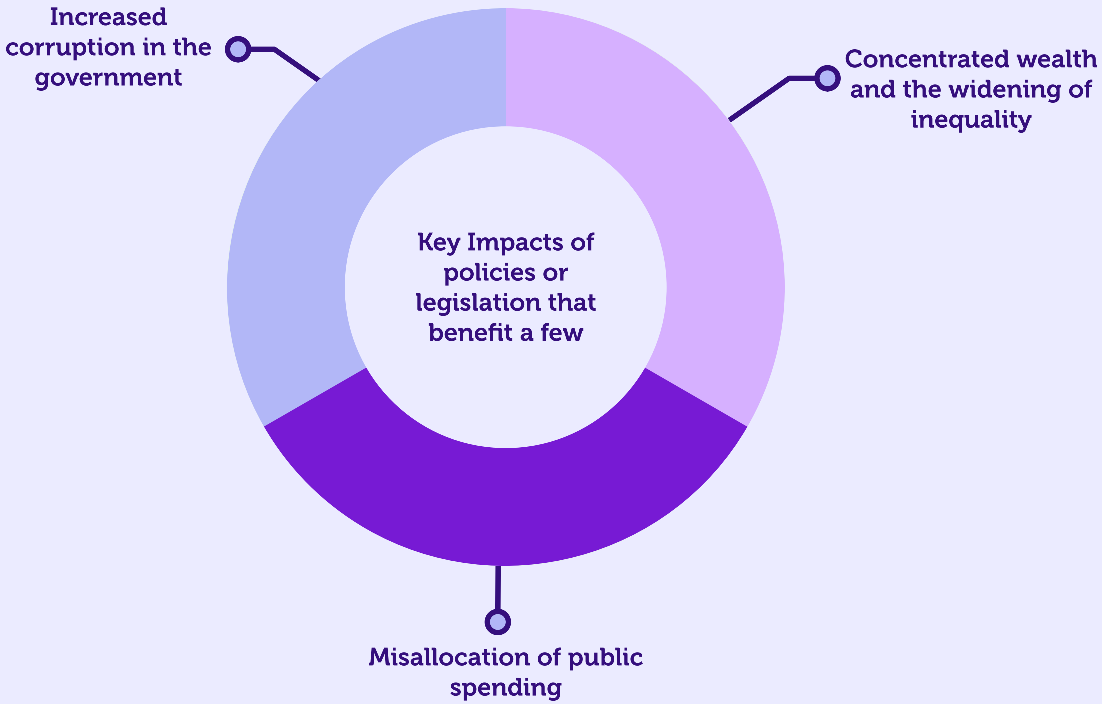
In this scenario, a rushed piece of legislation was passed to ensure that specific benefits were given for these special zones. The legislation does not appear to serve any real public good other than vaguely defined "accelerated economic growth", and appears to favour massive corporations through tax benefits and reduced regulations. Additionally, the passing of this law appears to have caused the public budget to be reallocated from public infrastructure to developing these new zones.

# Why does this matter?

Any law or policy instituted by the government must ultimately serve the interests of the public in a fair manner, ensuring that **all citizens have the opportunity to benefit** from government services, programs, resources, and opportunities equally. When policies or legislation benefit only a select few, ordinary **citizens are denied access to opportunities.** At the same time, wealthy elites, influential corporations, or politically-connected individuals are able to leverage their power, networks, and financial might to shape policies to their advantage.

Over time, the constant repetition of these practices **entrenches inequalities, ensuring that wealth, resources, and influence is concentrated** in the hands of a small selection of individuals. Here, the government's priorities are warped from delivering public goods and services to protecting the interests and privileges of powerful elites.

The effects of this can be simplified into a few key impacts:

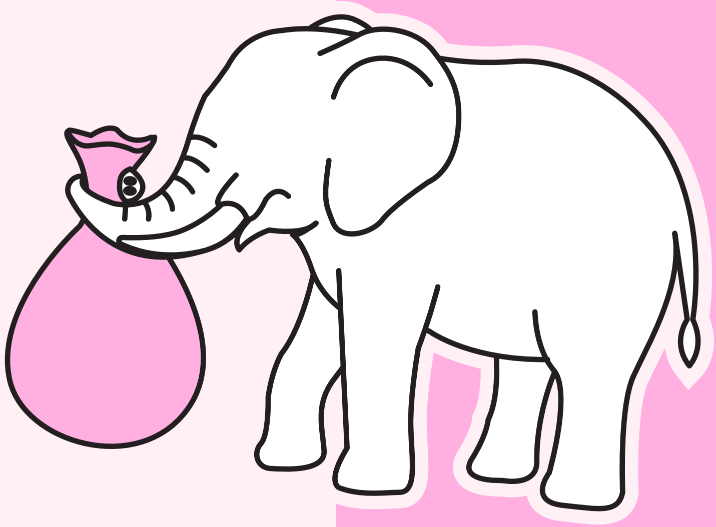


# “White elephant” mega projects

4th Red Flag:

# "White elephant" mega projects

"White elephant" mega projects are **large-scale government initiatives that consume massive amount of public funds but deliver little real benefit,** often becoming symbols of waste and corruption. These projects often look "impressive" on paper, and are talked up by politicians, but in reality are impractical, underutilised.



## What is a "white elephant" project?

The term "white elephant" originates from Southeast Asian history, primarily in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. In this context, while white elephants were viewed as magnificent and sacred animals, they brought with them extremely burdensome costs. The term has evolved to mean large-scale projects, usually infrastructure, that **consume vast resources but deliver little public utility.**

Below are important aspects to be aware of when considering whether a project is a "white elephant":

### Massive costs with little public benefit

Oftentimes, "white elephants" involve enormous use of public funds, but eventually end up incomplete or underutilised by members of the public. Because these projects demand massive financial, human, and material resources, they are extremely **slow to build and often face repeated delays.** Even when completed, many of these projects fail to generate the promised benefits, leaving behind empty facilities, idle infrastructure, or half-finished structures.

### "Prestigious" but impractical

As alluded to above, politicians in power may push mega projects to showcase "ambition", even if the projects **do not bring any practical benefits.** In many cases, such projects are set in motion not through well-thought-out planning or community consultation, but due to the whims of a single individual or a small circle of political allies. This concentration of decision-making power means that billions in public funds can be committed without proper checks-and-balances, feasibility studies, or consideration of long-term sustainability.

# Red flags to look out for

Although it is tempting to blame vanity and poor planning for "white elephants", they often come about as a result of deeper corruption within government. Delving deeper into how these projects are conceived, funded, and executed may reveal how public funds are misused for the private gain of a small group of political elites.

When assessing whether a project is a "white elephant" it is important to ask:

"How much does the project cost?"

The telltale sign that a project is a "white elephant" is ballooned costs across the board. **Inflated contracts** may be awarded to companies connected to political elites, allowing them to pocket excess funds. **Kickbacks** can occur when contractors secretly return a portion of the inflated budget to officials as a bribe for securing the deal. In other cases, **embezzlement** takes place, where individuals siphon off public money under the guise of project expenses. Unjustifiably high costs signal that the **project's expenses are being manipulated**

"Which companies were selected?"

When a lucrative government contract is awarded, it is important to carefully examine **who exactly received it.** If the winning companies are directly connected to key decision-makers in government – such as **family members, close associates, or political allies,** such connections suggest that contracts may not have been awarded **based on merit or capability.**

Another red flag arises when the selected companies are **newly formed** just before being granted the contract, **lack prior experience** in the industry, or have undergone **changes at the executive or board level** recently. This pattern often indicates that the company was chosen solely to capture government funds.

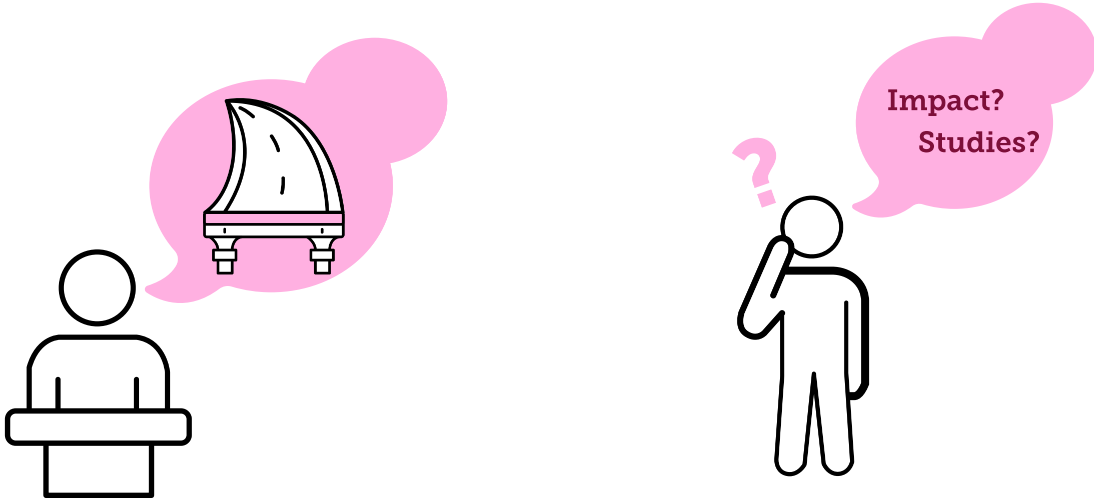
Together, these signs point to potential cronyism, nepotism, favouritism, political patronage, and abuse of power in the decision-making process.

"What is the justification for the project?"

Ultimately, any project or initiative proposed by the government must be **properly justified.** This is particularly the case for as government projects utilise public resources, meaning that costs are indirectly borne by taxpayers. Proper justification requires **transparent feasibility studies, cost-benefit analyses, and open consultation** with communities to ensure that the initiative truly addresses public need. Here, it is important to consider whether a project is **necessary,** will **benefit the public,** and whether the costs are **proportionate to the expected outcomes.**

## Examples in everyday life

### Scenario 4




The government announces an elevated highway project intended to ease congestion between two urban centres. The proposed alignment runs directly along the edge of a densely populated township, where you live. Overnight, you notice how survey teams appear along the township boundary and residents soon receive compulsory acquisition notices. A large promotional billboard goes up showing the proposed interchange, but the full traffic study, social and environmental impact assessments, and alignment maps are not published, while public consultations have yet to be held by the government.

Soon after, the government announces that a single firm has been appointed as the developer, with a lucrative billion dollar contract. Despite the demands of residents, little information is given on the tender award process.

In this scenario, the government pursues a massive infrastructure project without any public consultation. This is despite the development of this highway clearly affecting numerous residents that live in the densely populated township. Additionally, a single firm is appointed as the developer of the project, with little information provided as to why they were selected and the process behind it. These are all telltale signs that the project is a "white elephant" meant to extract funds from public coffers. Ultimately, local residents pay the price.

# Why does this matter?

White elephant mega projects often **impose massive and avoidable costs on the public.** This inevitably diverts attention and funding away from essential services such as healthcare, education, and basic infrastructure. Further wastage is possible as mega projects often involve misappropriation and inflated costs.

Additionally, as mega projects often take up vast tracts of land, there is a possibility of displacing communities and degrading environmental ecosystems. The risk is that meaningful consultation and proper social and environmental impact assessments are disregarded as key decision-makers have already made up their mind. The burden ultimately falls disproportionately on the most vulnerable of society, who may have their homes taken away from them or be gravely impacted by potential environmental harms as the construction of massive structures takes place outside their doorstep.

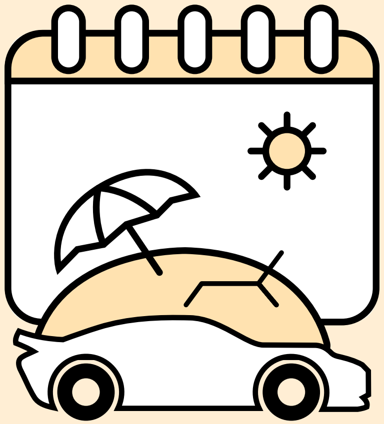

# Sudden wealth accumulation by elected representatives and public officials

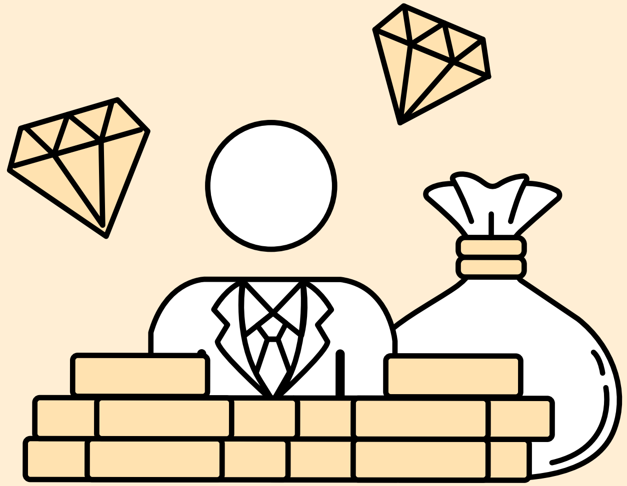
5th Red Flag:

# Sudden wealth accumulation by elected representatives and public officials

Sudden wealth accumulation refers to situations where politicians or public officials experience a **rapid and unexplained increase in personal wealth.** This can include luxury properties, expensive cars, lavish lifestyles, or large financial holdings that **far exceed their official salaries** and legitimate income sources.

# Red flags to look out for





### Disproportionate lifestyle

A lifestyle disproportionate to a public official or elected representative's means could be indicative of corruption. This form of sudden wealth accumulation is often visible through **ownership of luxury items such as jewelry, high-end cars, or lavish properties** that would normally be out of reach for someone on a official salary. It can also be evident in patterns of **frequent extravagant spending** – such as costly holidays, exclusive events, or luxury hobbies.

### Unexplained assets

A more concealed way for public officials to possess wealth is through the **accumulation of large, unexplained assets.** Unlike visible signs such as luxury cars or jewelry, these assets are often **hidden in financial instruments** that are harder for the public to detect. This can include **substantial business shares, real estate holdings, or investments** that far exceed what their official salary could reasonably support.

## Why corruption may be involved?

Sudden and unexplained increases in wealth among public officials are **rarely the result of legitimate income streams.** Public service salaries are generally modest, and while officials may have personal businesses or investments, these should be **transparent and proportionate to their declared earnings.**

Below are ways in which public officials and elected representatives can accumulate wealth through illicit means:

### Insider influence

Officials may also **exploit privileged information** to enrich themselves. Officials with **advance knowledge of upcoming policies,** laws, or contract awards can make **profitable investments before those decisions are public.** Alternatively, officials may also **peddle information,** by selling insider information in exchange for bribes or other benefits.

### Bribery and kickbacks

The most basic form of corruption in public service is via simple bribery. This involves officials accepting bribes in exchange for **awarding contracts, passing favorable legislation, or overlooking wrongdoing.** As mentioned in the previous chapter, individuals stand to earn as well from **kickbacks** – which are obtained from inflated contracts that are funnelled to an official for helping secure a lucrative government project.

### Embezzlement of public funds

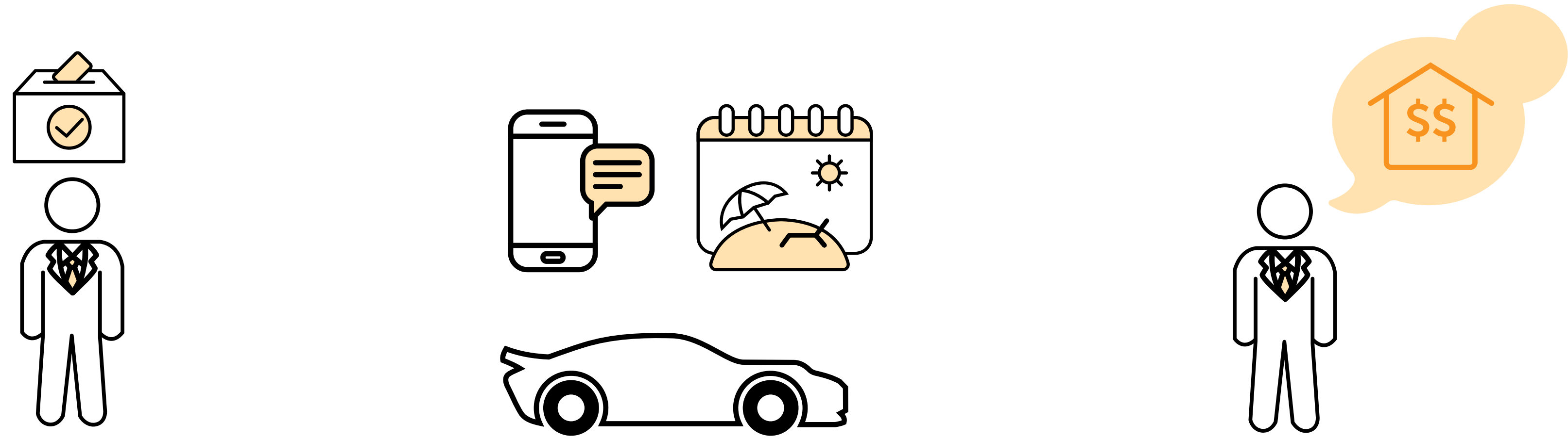
Embezzlement happens when public officials **misappropriate money entrusted** to their care using their authority and access to divert funds away from intended purposes for personal gain. Officials may **approve inflated budgets** and **falsify records or claims,** with funds clandestinely diverted into their own pockets.

### Cronyism and nepotism

Cronyism and nepotism are common pathways through which public officials can accumulate sudden, unexplained wealth: instead of direct theft, these practices **route public resources and lucrative opportunities to a narrow circle** of family members, close associates, or political allies, indirectly enriching themselves. Officials may steer procurement, concessions, or licenses to firms owned by relatives or friends, who then return value to the official or enrich the official’s household.

## Examples in everyday life

### Scenario 5




The newly-appointed housing minister, who was elected from your constituency, begins showing visible signs of wealth, shortly after being voted into office. Within 12-months, you see him driving around in luxury cars, while his children post travel photos indicating lavish holidays overseas on social media. At the same time, his ministry approves radical "urban redevelopment" policies that heavily favour developers. You notice how the low cost public flat in your neighbourhood is bought over by a massive development company, with residents forced to accept cut price compensation payments or risk being left homeless.

In this scenario, a newly-appointed minister is clearly displaying immense signs of wealth despite only just entering office. The contrast between his sudden extreme wealth and his ministry's policies' favouring developers indicate potential corruption that has affected his decision-making ability.

# Why does this matter?

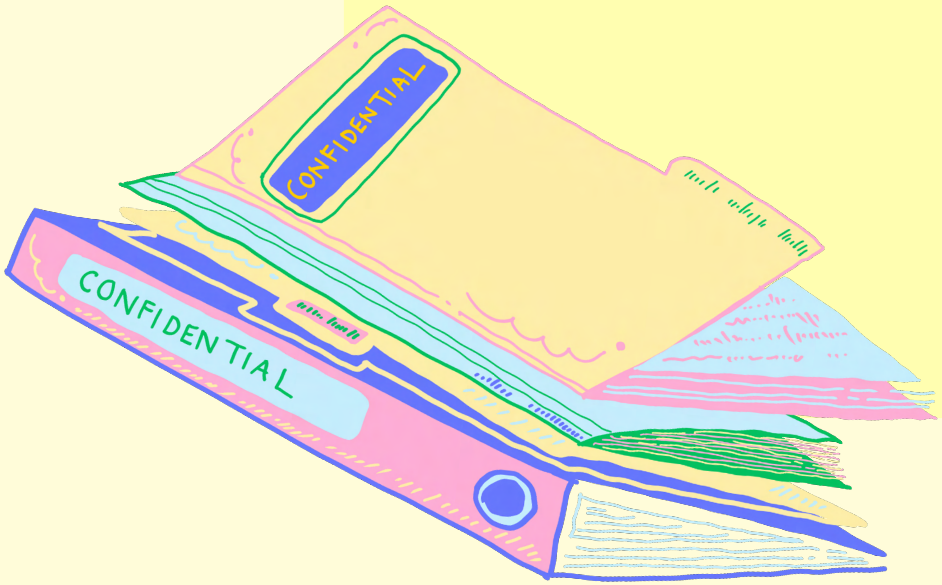
A major effect of sudden and unexplained wealth accumulation by elected representatives and public officials is the direct **diversion of public funds for an individual's private gain.** In this context, assets and wealth accumulated by officials often **originate from bribes, embezzlement, and unfair dealings.** Inevitably, public services will suffer when individuals responsible with overseeing them prioritise wealth accumulation.

# Large scandals with little accountability

## 6th Red Flag:

# Large scandals with little accountability

Large scandals with little accountability refers to instances where major corruption is not adequately addressed by authorities, despite public outcry and wrongdoing appearing obvious. This manifests in investigations and prosecutions that are slow, incomplete, or appear blocked. Oftentimes, despite major headlines visibly discussing the scandal, there are no real consequences to accused individuals.




## Why this happens?

Large scandals go unpunished because powerful actors are able to **influence law enforcement, exploit legal and institutional gaps, possess political and administrative power or utilise complex financial techniques** to conceal illicit money flows.

## DID YOU KNOW ?

In Malaysia, corruption is defined merely as "gratification" under the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) Act 2009, meaning that larger instances of corruption such as cronyism, nepotism, and political patronage are not properly defined legally.

## Influence law enforcement

Influential individuals are able to **directly manipulate the actions of the law enforcement,** prosecutors, and other regulatory bodies. This ensures that investigations are slowed, reduced, or never even commenced.

Possible tactics:

- **Appointing loyalists and trusted individuals to key positions**
- **Reassigning or removing individuals who attempt to initiate investigations**
- **Political interference in appointments and administration**
- **Capture of enforcement & oversight agencies**
- **Legal and procedural constraints**

## Exploit legal and institutional gaps

When corrupt actors also hold political office and senior positions in government, they are able to **use their formal authority to protect themselves and their allies.** In certain instances, these officeholders can stop investigations entirely through the exercise of their power.

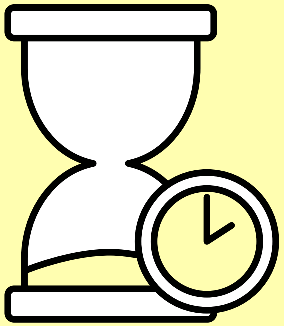
## Utilise complex financial techniques

Oftentimes, illicit transactions are **hidden through many layer of financial transactions.** This can be through shell companies, foreign bank accounts, as well as complex and opaque ownership structures. These complex financial techniques often utilise foreign companies and accounts to conceal transactions, which also works at impeding local law enforcement from seizing or freezing funds as they may not have the jurisdiction to sanction cross-border financial flows.

## Possess political and administrative power

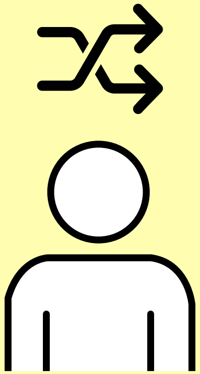
Corrupt actors can also **take advantage of vague laws or procedural loopholes to avoid accountability.** For instance, corrupt actors can take advantage of narrow definitions of corruption to get away with serious offences.

# Red flags to look out for



### Stalled or repeatedly delayed prosecutions

In this instance, investigations appear to be **dragged on or delayed for a long time without any clear progress.** This could be done through repeated trial date adjustments or prosecutors asking for “extensions” citing “ongoing investigations”.



### Sudden leadership changes in enforcement agencies

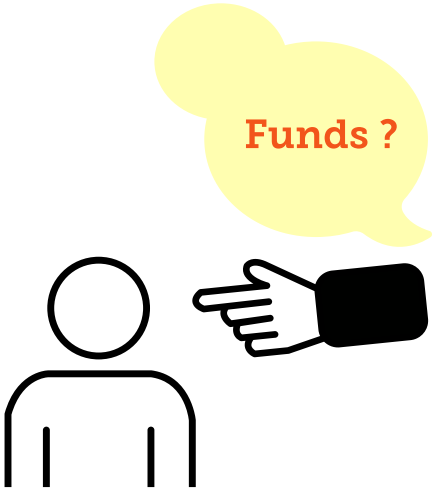
Here, key leadership figures at enforcement agencies **suddenly resign, are reassigned or are sacked.** This may mean that work is being done to impede investigations into alleged wrongdoing.

### Minimal penalties or out-of-court “settlements”

Oftentimes, during high profile corruption cases, **corrupt actors may appear to get off lightly, despite having committed massive crimes.** For example, a businessman alleged to have paid bribes may only need to pay a fine or serve a suspended jail sentence. This may indicate that work was done behind the scenes to ensure that corrupt actors avoid direct and fair accountability for wrongdoing.

## Examples in everyday life

### Scenario 6



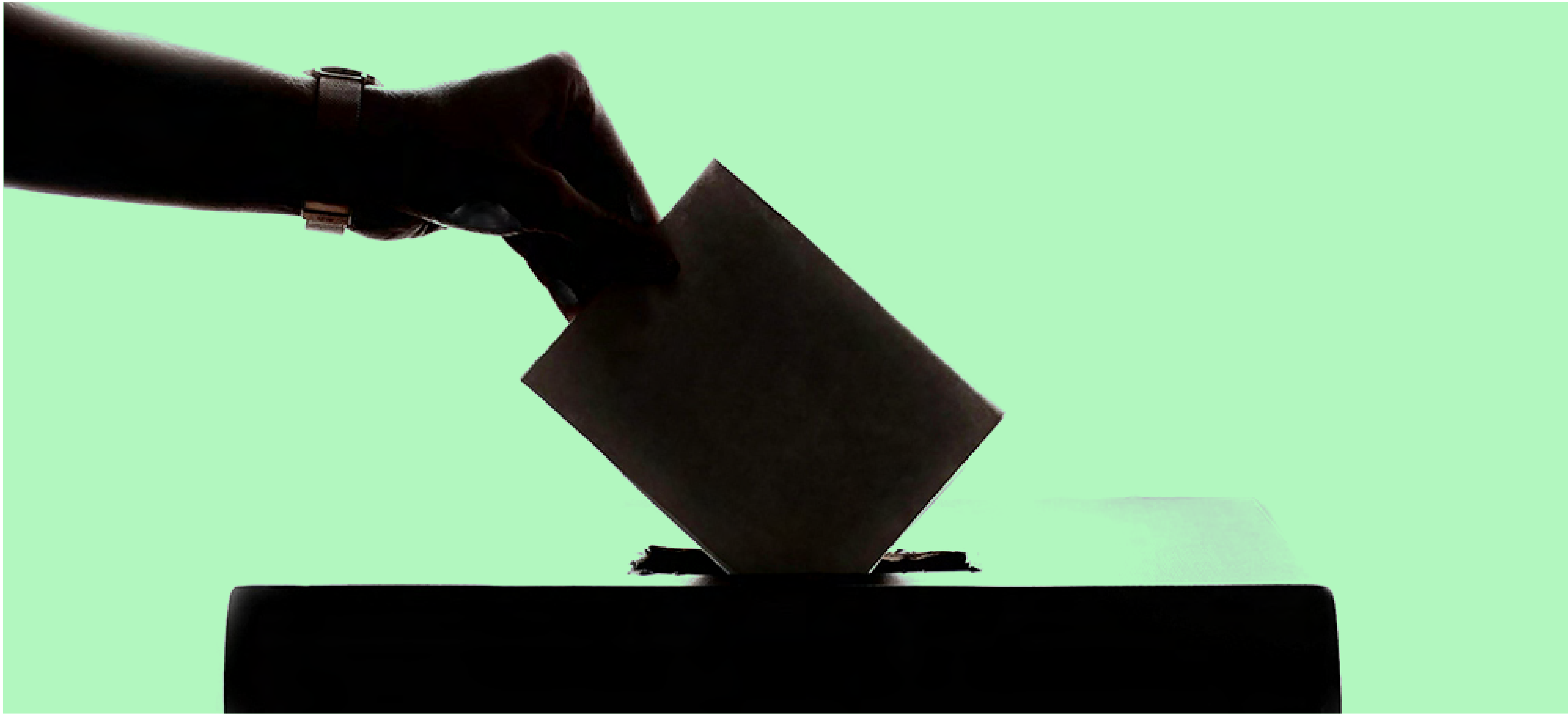


A senior government minister is accused of misappropriating millions of public funds for personal gain. Exposés by investigative journalists reveal large transactions taking place in foreign bank accounts said to be owned by the minister. Shortly after, the head of the country’s anti-corruption agency publicly declares that investigations will be opened into the minister. However, just a week after this declaration, the government announces that the anti-corruption chief is retiring, despite being a few years short of the retirement age. After months of coverage, the scandal fades from the news cycle after the investigative journalists are hit with defamation lawsuits, while the minister restates his innocence multiple times publicly.

In this scenario, a senior government minister is able to get off scot free, despite multiple reports of him having been involved in corruption. Here, the minister appears to have used his authority as a senior minister to force the “retirement” of the anti-corruption chief, leaving no enforcement agency capable of investigating him for wrongdoing. Additionally, the journalists who first reported on his corruption were silenced through strategic lawsuits.

# Why does this matter?

When massive corruption scandals are allowed to take place unpunished, it signals that powerful actors are above the law and are able to escape consequences for clear wrongdoing on the basis of the power and influence that they hold. Continued impunity may embolden corrupt actors to repeat misconduct, with the knowledge that no action will be taken against them for clear corrupt activities. Ultimately, this leads to massive leakages in public funds as corrupt actors are able to continue extracting funds from public coffers for their own benefit without the risk of accountability.

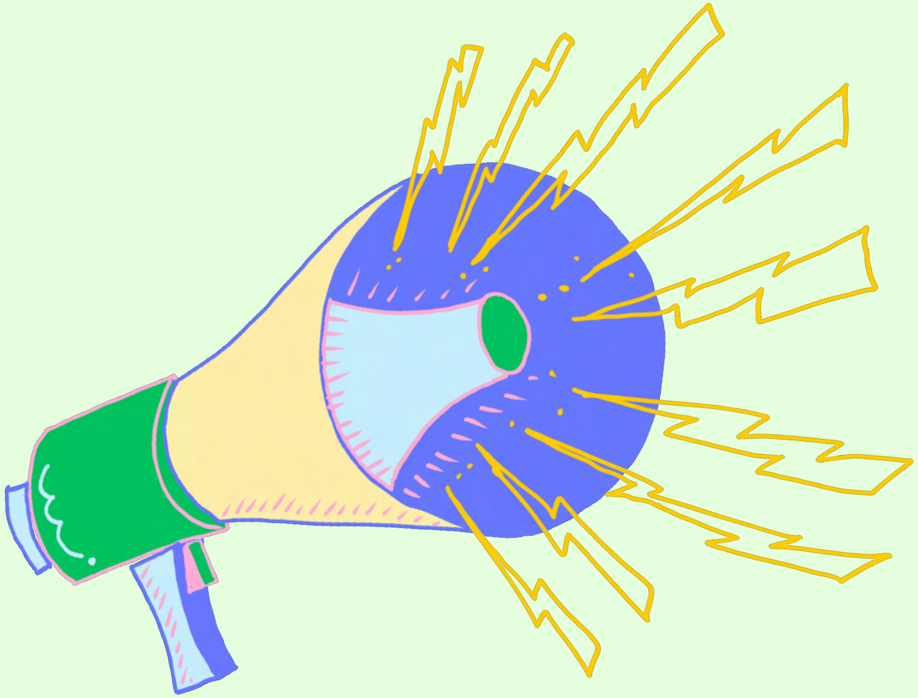


# A lack of complaints or reporting channels

7th Red Flag:

# A lack of complaints or reporting channels

A lack of complaints or reporting channels means there are **no safe, accessible, and effective ways** for individuals to report wrongdoing, or that **existing channels are unreliable** with there being no guarantees of confidentiality, protection from retaliation or action taken by authorities. Without trusted reporting routes and legal protections, corruption remains hidden and wrongdoing goes unchallenged.

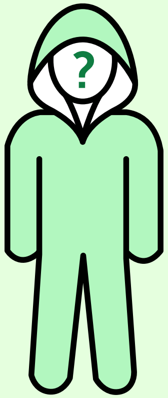


## Why this happens?

Making complaints or disclosures against corruption is often the **most effective way to root out wrongdoing.** Empowering people to speak up ensures that misconduct does not remain hidden, and that those responsible are held accountable. This is especially critical because individuals with firsthand knowledge often provide the most reliable and detailed evidence. Their voices can **expose practices that would otherwise remain invisible to enforcement agencies.**

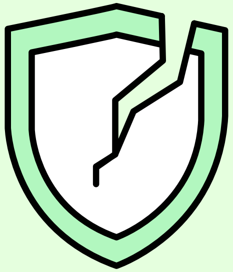
Whistleblowers have the unique capability to dismantle even the most complex and clandestine corruption networks. Their insider knowledge often provides investigators with crucial information needed to expose wrongdoing. Importantly, this includes whistleblowers who may themselves have been involved in corrupt acts. Their participation does not diminish the value of their disclosures; in fact, it often enhances their credibility because they understand how the schemes operate from within.

## Barriers to a safe system of reporting and complaints



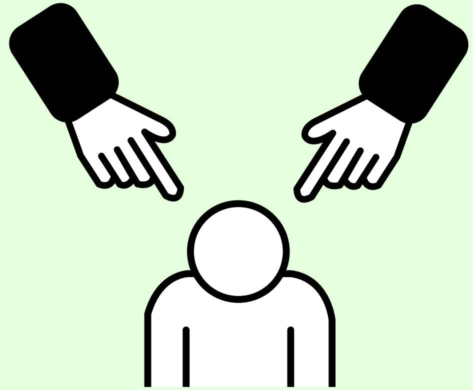

### A lack of a secure, anonymous reporting mechanism

When there are no safe and anonymous ways to report wrongdoing, individuals are forced to either **stay silent or risk exposing themselves.** Secure channels are critical for protecting whistleblowers. Without them, insiders cannot share evidence without fear of being identified, and corruption remains hidden behind institutional walls.



### Weak or non-existent protection

Even if reporting channels exist, they are **ineffective without strong legal protections.** In many contexts, whistleblower protection laws are either absent, poorly enforced, or riddled with loopholes. This means whistleblowers can face workplace retaliation, lawsuits, or even civil or criminal charges for exposing wrongdoing.

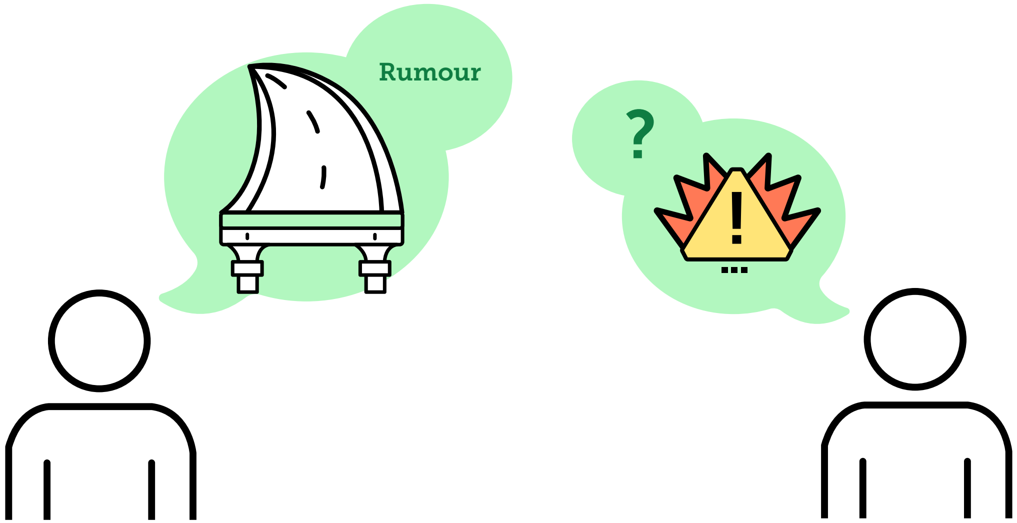


### Fear of retaliation

Whistleblowers often worry about **losing their jobs, being harassed, or putting their family members at risk.** If there are no guarantees that retaliation is prevented, potential whistleblowers may deem speaking out as unsafe.

## Examples in everyday life

### Scenario 7




You live nearby the construction of a new elevated highway project, said to cost hundreds of millions to build. You have heard rumours from construction workers and members of your community of how corners have clearly been cut in the development of this massive piece of infrastructure. After a tragic incident on the construction site, the developer waves away concerns by calling it a “freak accident”, announcing that construction will continue as planned. Soon, you come across media reports on an anonymous whistleblower, who plans on exposing the clear safety violations happening at the construction site. Authorities discredit the whistleblower for going public and not choosing to submit their complaints through the “proper channels”. The story fades from the headlines, and no official investigation follows.

This scenario highlights how corruption and negligence can persist when whistleblowers lack protection. Even when wrongdoing is visible and people are willing to speak up, the absence of adequate reporting channels means their voices are silenced or punished. Ultimately, it demonstrates that without a strong complaint system, corruption thrives unchecked and ordinary citizens are left powerless.

# Why does this matter?

If complaints and whistleblowing channels are absent or ineffective, corrupt actors are shielded from having their wrongdoing reported on. Insiders who witness corrupt activities behind the scenes have no safe way to provide evidence, while a lack of reports prevents investigators from receiving leads to take down intricate corrupt networks. The effect is the near-total silencing of whistleblowers.

# Link Dump

## 01 Conflicts of interest in decision-making processes

[1] https://www.finance.gov.au/government/managing-commonwealth-resources/managing-conflicts-interest-and-confidentiality-non-government-sector-rmg-208/common-definition-conflict-interest

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[3] https://www.sc.com.my/about/board-members/disclosure-on-conflicts-of-interest

[4] https://c4center.org/conflict-of-interest-preventing-political-patronage-and-corruption-in-malaysia/

[5] https://antikorupsi.org/sites/default/files/dokumen/Case%20-Study%20Of%20Concurrent%20Position%20of%20Law%20Enforcement%20Officials%20as%20SoE%20Commissioners_0.pdf

[6] https://www.antibriberyguidance.org/guidance/11-conflicts-interest/guidance

[7] https://www.open-contracting.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/OCP2024-RedFlagProcurement-1.pdf?

## 02 Lack of access to information

[1] https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/UNCAC-Guide-FInal.pdf

[2] https://www.unodc.org/e4j/fr/anti-corruption/module-10/key-issues/access-to-information_-a-condition-for-citizen-participation.html

[3] https://uncaccoalition.org/using-access-to-information-in-the-fight-against-corruption/

[4] https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/topics/access-to-information-parent-label

[5] https://sinarproject.org/projects/enabling-tech?utm_source=copilot.com

[6] https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/analysis/malaysia-official-secrets-act-sept-2004.pdf

[7] https://theedgemalaysia.com/article/g%E2%80%99s-final-report-1mdb-classified-under-osa

## 03 Policies or legislations that benefit a few

[1] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/preventing-policy-capture_9789264065239-en.html

[2] https://books.google.com.my/books/about/OECD_Public_Governance_Reviews_Preventin.html?id=4ySQDgAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y

[3] https://info.legistorm.com/blog/what-is-government-relations

## 04 "White elephant" mega projects

[1] https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/white-elephant.html

[2] https://muse.jhu.edu/article/456776

[3] https://www.apm.org.uk/resources/find-a-resource/research-series/corruption-in-public-projects-and-mega-projects/

[4] https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-handbook-of-project-behavior/project-misbehavior-in-infrastructure-projects/05B21C298864D02BDCA2A4656F4582D9

## 05 Sudden wealth accumulation by elected representatives and public officials

[1] https://nardelloandco.com/our-insights/article/when-life-styles-dont-match-paychecks-an-analysis-of-the-serious-fraud-offices-first-unexplained-wealth-order/

[2] https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/12/1345048/explainer-najib-razak-and-multibillion-dollar-1mdb-scandal?

## 06 Large scandals with little accountability

[1] https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/12/26/1mdb-inside-malaysias-extraordinary-tale-of-missing-billions-and-political-downfall/203273

[2] https://www.emerald.com/pap/article/25/2/136/317385/Challenges-in-combating-corruption-in-Malaysia

[3] https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/documents/Publications/2024/UNODC_Anti-Corruption_Hub_for_South-East_Asia_Brochure_Nov_2024.pdf

[4] https://kraccorruption.com/csos-news-events/case-lessons-of-corruption-in-public-procurement/

## Beginning Your Advocacy

# What do I do now?

Now that you understand what corruption red flags are and how to identify them, you might be wondering, **"what do I do now?"**

This can be an incredibly daunting question to ask yourself, and there is no single answer that can help address all your problems. However, the next part of this toolkit seeks to provide you with useful guides and tips as to how to answer that question. With a little help from C4 Center's over-a-decade long experience fighting corruption and advocating for good governance in Malaysia, we hope to provide useful information for youths to help them take the next step against injustice.

## 1.Defining the issue clearly

You have read about corruption red flags, how they happen in real-life, why they matter, and a few pointers to spot them. Now, it's time to put this information to work. Take a minute to reflect and look around you, ask yourself the following questions:

"Who is involved?"

"Why could this be happening?"

"What exactly is happening?"

"How is it affecting me and my community?"

## What exactly is happening?

It is easy to throw around the word "corruption" whenever something seems suspicious or unclear, but doing so without precision can weaken the credibility of any movement. Before beginning, it is essential to carefully examine the situation and establish exactly what is happening. This means identifying the specific decisions or actions taken that raise concern. Pinpointing the issue allows you to determine whether corruption is truly involved or not. A clear definition of the issue also helps activists and community members focus their energy on a concrete target, gather relevant evidence, and build a stronger case for accountability.

Here, it is crucial that you remember to **document your evidence**, whether that be photographs of the alleged corruption, news clippings reporting on the issue, or statements made by politicians, corporate executives, and other relevant public figures. Having a clear set of evidence before you will help you break down the issue better.

## Why could this be happening?

At this stage, it is important to consider what the possible explanations are for what is happening. This requires a careful look at the circumstances and efforts to connect them to the corruption red flags identified previously.

> "Were there conflicts of interest in the decision-making process that we know of?"

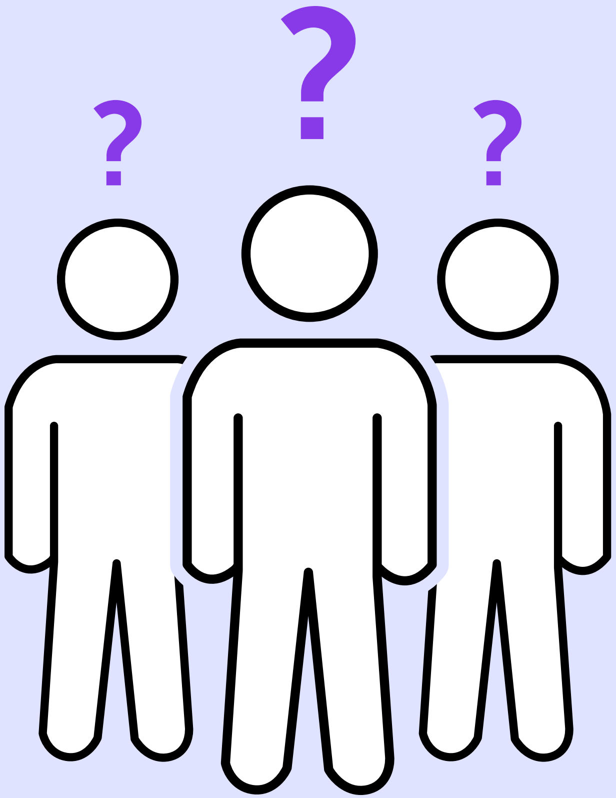
> "Was there enough transparency?"

> "Were these laws or policies approved suddenly and seemingly to favour one group of people?"

These questions can help us better understand why an issue may be occurring, and how best to address the issue. Understanding "why" is crucial to allow any movement to respond more effective-

## Who is involved?

The next step is of extreme importance – identifying who is responsible makes it clear where accountability lies and what corrective actions are needed. At this stage, you should carefully map out the individuals, institutions, and groups connected to the issue. This includes those who made the decisions, those who benefit from them, and those who were excluded or harmed. Having knowledge of who may be adversely impacted by alleged corruption may help further bolster your evidence, and even lead to future partnerships and collaborations.

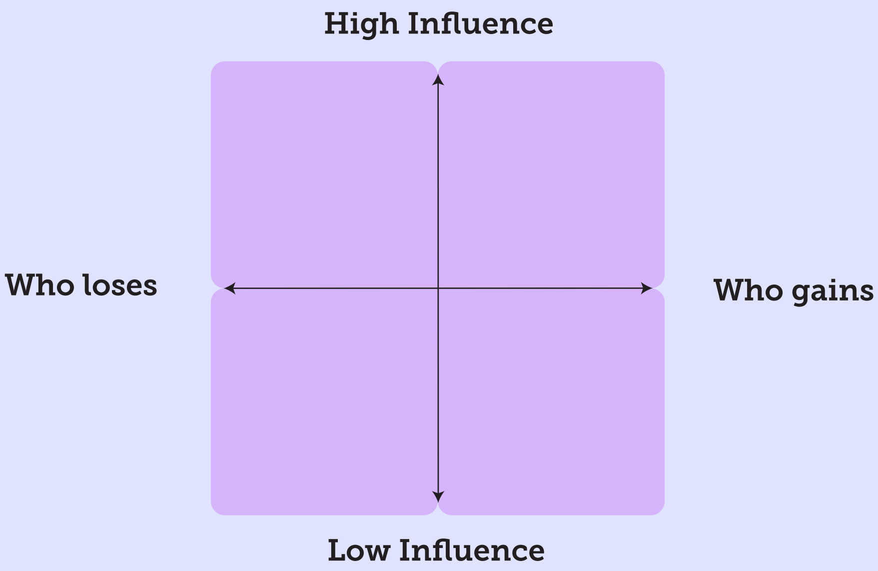


## How is it affecting me and my community?

Lastly, it is important not to lose sight of why this matters. Corruption's effects ripples outward and affects entire communities. When asking "how is it affecting me and my community?", the goal is to connect the issue to the people around you. Above all, remember that what you are fighting for is bigger than you as an individual. The issue cuts across all segments of society, affecting livelihoods, opportunities, and the entire community.

A practical and engaging way to answer the "who" and the "how" in this is through a stakeholder map: a visual tool that lays out all the key stakeholders, their roles, and their relationships to the issue.

Below is a basic stakeholder map that is tried and tested method of understanding this:




By clearly listing out who gains from the situation and who loses, communities can better understand how corruption affects them, and subsequently design strategies that target the right actors.

## Here's a scenario to help you fill in each question.

| | |
|---|---|
| **What?** | A major plot of land situated in a forest reserve near where you live was just awarded to a major development company to construct luxury apartments. The development plans were approved without public consultations or engagements with local residents, environmental experts or members of civil society, and appeared to have been approved suddenly and quickly. |
| **Who?** | The developers, local residents, and politicians in power. |
| **Why?** | The developer may have ties to the politicians in power or may have bribed their way into being awarded the contract. The developer may have benefitted from the first red flag we identified earlier, "conflicts of interest in the decision-making process". |
| **How?** | The clearing of forest space will cause massive biodiversity in both flora and fauna within the area, displacing wildlife into urban areas – where they are at risk of harm or danger. The construction of luxury apartments will also disproportionately benefit individuals of a higher socioeconomic status, potentially bringing costs up in the surrounding area |

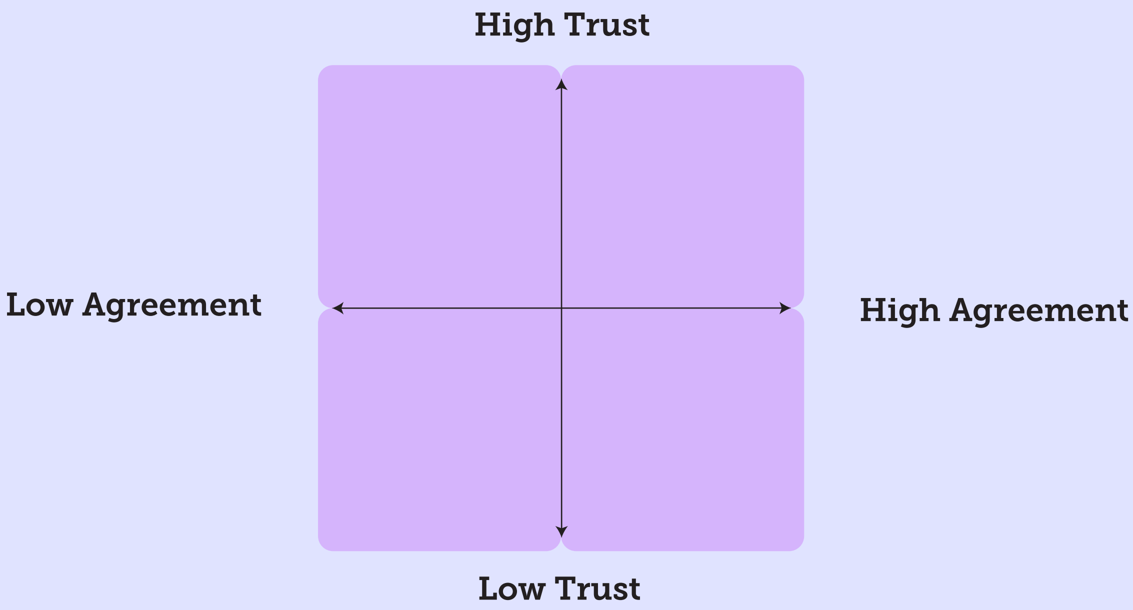
# 2. Finding your allies

A movement cannot be confined to one individual. That is why finding your allies is a crucial step in the fight against corruption. The easiest thing you can do to start off is by identifying people you already know – members of your community and your friends – who already share the same set of beliefs as you do. A strong group of like-minded individuals can go a long way in creating a movement that not only moves in the same direction, but is also sustainable.

Building off the stakeholder mapping earlier, the next step is to turn that map into a living network of people and organisations who can help you take action. Ultimately, far more can be achieved by working together than alone. Allies expand your reach, lend credibility, provide technical skills, and create pressure points that a single individual cannot do by themselves.

From the earlier stakeholder map, identify potential partners by assessing whether you share the same set of problems. Here, it is important to respect their priorities and constraints – a partnership is about mutual benefit after all. Remember, key stakeholders affected by the problem may not have the time or capacity to be direct allies. However, they are still valuable contributors to your movement because, as those most directly impacted, they provide the lived experience and local knowledge that helps build a formidable movement. They provide valuable information through testimonies and observations that can bolster your activism.

You can even tweak your stakeholder map a bit to get a better picture of who makes good allies and who may potentially become your direct adversaries, as seen below:



Remember, alliance building requires ongoing engagement, collaboration and constant contact with key partners. Don't expect a strong partnership to be built after meeting another group for the first time.

It is important to remember here not to reinvent the wheel. If there are other groups or organisations already doing something similar, reach out to them to learn and develop your own movement. This could even grow into a larger collaboration that helps expand your efforts beyond one issue. Here, it is also important to look beyond your own community and even country. Look out for other organisations, who believe in the same mission as you, and learn from their successes and even their failures. It also helps that many of these organisations have a wealth of resources that you can rely on to learn even more.

**Recommendation**

On that note, we strongly recommend reading the UNODC's Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment (GRACE) Initiative or GRACE Initiatives' toolkit for more information on how youths can be empowered in the fight against corruption. They give real insight "from youths for youths" on getting started in the anti-corruption fight.

https://grace.unodc.org/grace/uploads/documents/Youthled_toolkit-optimized.pdf

# 3. Identifying solutions

You now have a clear picture of your problem, and have mapped out potential allies to support you in your fight. Now it's time to find solutions to the problem and address it head on. Before drawing up detailed solutions that are tailor-made for your specific set of circumstances, you should have an overarching goal or vision that you want to see happen.

Your Vision

# What do you want to happen?

Your vision should be clear and easy to understand. This vision describes the change you want to see, and will be the heart of all your efforts. Ultimately, every plan of action you have is geared up to make your vision a reality. The vision should be practical, and something you know you can achieve.

Having now established a clear vision, you can move towards identifying a solution. Essentially, developing a solution means thinking of steps you need to take for your vision to be realised. Below is a quick framework to help you develop a meaningful and realistic solution:

**Proposed Solution:**

This is the specific action or initiative you want to implement to address the problem. It should be practical, realistic, and directly linked to your vision.

**Resources needed:**

This section identifies the human, financial, technical, and knowledge resources required to make your solution possible.

**Objectives:**

Objectives are the goals your solution aims to achieve. They should be concrete and measurable, showing how the solution contributes to solving the problem.

**Short-term outcomes:**

These are the immediate goals you can achieve within weeks or months. They build momentum and show progress early on.

**Long-term outcomes:**

These are the broader, lasting changes you want to see over years. They connect directly to your vision and ensure sustainability.

**Based on your identified problem, try applying the framework in practice:**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Problem:** | |
| **Vision:** | |
| **Proposed Solution:** | |
| **Objectives:** | |
| **Short-term outcomes:** | |
| **Long-term outcomes:** | |
| **Resources needed:** | |

# 4. Crafting your message

You've identified the problem and possible solutions already, but how do you begin to take action? This starts by crafting a compelling message, a message which will be communicated to your community, the authorities, and the public at-large.

## Choosing your audience

The first step you should take before crafting any message is to understand who your audience is. Remember, different audiences require different messages – communicating with your allies is different to communicating to the broader public. Depending on their level of understanding, you may want to adjust the level of detail you speak on a particular topic. For example, highly-specific, technical explanations on a topic are better suited for individuals already familiar with your work, while more simplified, easy-to-understand explanations work better for members of the general public.

## Developing the message

Once you have identified your audience, proceed by describing:

### The problem

Based on the previously identified steps, state the issue in one sentence. Use plain language and uncomplicated terms.

### Evidence

List the strongest verifiable facts you have (documents, news articles, data, photos, etc.). Make sure you clarify what is verified and what you are alleging or inferring

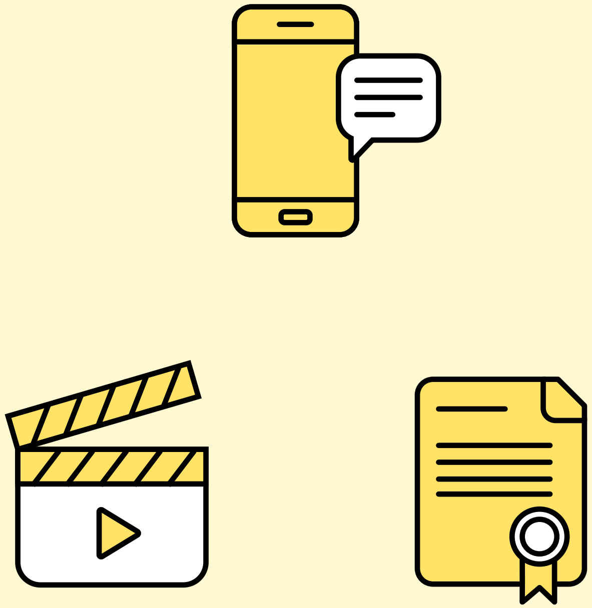
### Why it matters

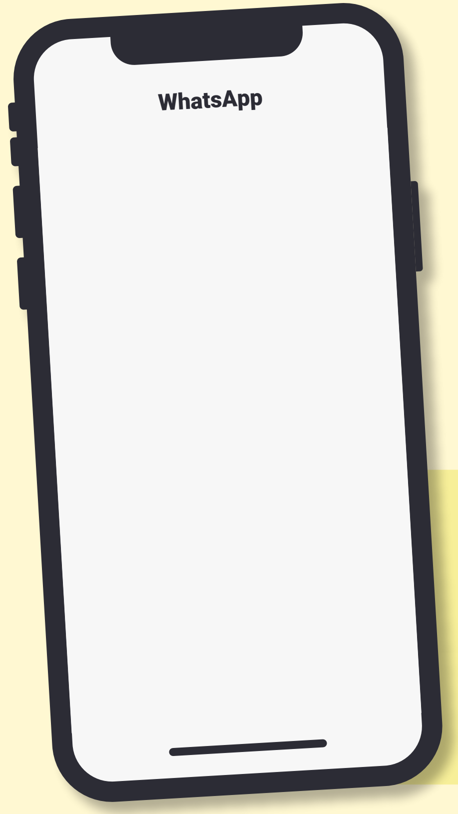
Explain the impact and make it relatable to your audience.

### What needs to change

This is the call to action. Make a clear demand that you want to see to remedy the situation.

Now that you have an idea of what your message will sound like, it is time to put that message in action. At this stage, you will need to find a medium to communicate your message and a platform to publicise it.






## Finding a medium

A medium is the form your message takes: a press statement, a short video, a social media post, a policy brief, or a petition. Choose a medium that lines up with your selected audience. For the general public, you would tend to use visuals and shorter-form content such as videos, infographics, or other social media content. For the policymakers, this would be through policy briefs or even research writing. This builds upon the previous step, where the who determines the how of your message.

## Using a platform

A platform is where you publish or share the medium — social media, the press, your website, or through an official government channel. Pick platforms based on your desired reach and, again, determined by your targeted audience. For example, social media platforms and the press are typically used for broad visibility, while targeted letters to the government or key policymakers are meant to directly communicate an issue to the people in power.

## Communicating the message

This step builds off the previous step of “developing your message”. Deliver your message so people understand what you are advocating for, why it matters, and what needs to be done. Your identified “problem” should be addressed with a clear headline, while your evidence is presented through a few verified facts. Depending on your medium and platform, you may want to consider the use of visuals to simplify complex issues. However, be sure to furnish clear evidence and details if you are targeting policymakers.

## Timing, coordination, and amplification

Ultimately, the quality of your message is only as good as its timing so be sure to time your message strategically. If you have allies with similar messaging, coordinate your message through multiple channels to increase visibility on an issue.

Below is a sample from C4 Center's past work that puts this framework into practice:

### Sample from C4 Center press statement, "Corporate Social Responsibility in Public Procurement – No Responsibility for Losses, No Empathy for Malaysians"

**The problem:**

Millions of public funds were wasted after the government purchased faulty ventilators needed during the COVID-19 pandemic

**Evidence:**

A report from Malaysia's Auditor-General provided an account of how ventilators purchased for the pandemic were faulty and rushed through using "emergency procedures"

**Why it matters:**

Ventilators meant to service COVID-19 patients in a critical condition ended up being faulty due to mismanagement of the procurement process

**What needs to change:**

Reform to Malaysia's procurement system and investigations into how the contracts were awarded to the medical supplier

**Medium:**

A press statement

**Platform:**

Sent to the press, who disseminated the statement on their various news platforms

**Timing:**

Immediately after the Auditor-General published their report

https://c4center.org/pac-findings-on-failed-pandemic-era-ventilator-procurement-reiterates-urgent-need-for-emergency-procurement-reform/

# 5. Reviewing, evaluating, and improving

Oftentimes, active advocacy against corruption involves speaking truth to power, which can put young activists in the firing line. The greatest risk activists often face when calling out corruption is retaliation from powerful individuals via lawsuits. It is common for powerful individuals to use defamation suits to silence "bad press", particularly when it involves exposing corrupt acts. In fact, C4 Center has faced its fair share of defamation lawsuits – though we are lucky enough not to have any of them end up in court.

That is why, this section will provide a few pointers to avoid getting yourself tangled in lengthy and costly defamation lawsuits.

## Avoid speculation

It is easy to go off conjecture and accusations, especially because these allegations are attention grabbing, but doing so without there being provable evidence can put you at risk. That's why it is important to always stick to what you can prove: **when in doubt, throw it out.** Here, specificity is crucial – if existing news reports link a politician to corruption, then directly reference these reports.

## Document your evidence

If what you are trying to say relies heavily on evidence of wrongdoing, be sure to document it and store it somewhere safely. Do not rely on a single copy, have back-ups in secure locations: print physical copies and store them safely, save digital copies on an external storage drive, or take screenshots of evidence you fear may be destroyed or removed

## Use careful language

Whenever you make a claim, be sure to couch it in the most careful language possible. If something is unproven, make sure to emphasise that it was "alleged". Do not immediately cast blame on an individual just because their name shows up. Also, do not resort to personal attacks and mischaracterisations to further your message. This has the double risk of causing potential lawsuits, but it also reduces your credibility as an organisation – particularly as it does not provide any substantive criticism of a corrupt act.

# 6. Reviewing, evaluating, and improving

Even after having done all of the above, it is important to remember that advocacy is not a one-time effort. Being an effective activist requires constant reflection and adjustment. In the previous steps, you have defined your problem, found your allies, identified solutions, and crafted your message to be put into action. Now, it is vital to monitor the progress of your efforts and to figure out where exactly you need to improve. Think about what you've done successfully, what challenges you have faced, and how you are progressing towards achieving your wider vision.

Here's a basic framework to help you better assess the outcome of your work:

**Actions taken**

What specific act did you take ?

**Results**

What were the outcomes of your action?

**Lessons learnt**

What worked and what didn't work for your movement? Why do you think so?

## Try writing it out:

| | |
|---|---|
| Actions taken | |
| Results | |
| Lessons learnt | |

# What next?

Now that you've gone through the toolkit, it's time to put it into action. Taking on corruption can be an incredibly daunting task, so remember that it takes more than one person to make substantial change. At the end of the day, every little effort counts – so don't forget to take stock of your wins and celebrate where you can.

It's important to always keep yourself informed, so stay tuned to our social media for more updates on the latest corruption and governance updates in Malaysia. We would love to hear more about youth initiatives across the region in combating corruption.