by Nadine Robitaille

When you strike out at corruption, corruption tends to strike back.

If anyone knows this to be true, it’s John Githongo.

Widely known as one of Africa’s most distinguished advocates for transparency and good governance, Githongo is currently residing in England, having resigned his post as Kenya’s leading corruption fighter.

He began his career as a journalist investigating corruption in his native Kenya, and later established and helmed the Kenyan office of the anti-corruption nongovernmental organization Transparency International (with whom IDRC has worked on various projects).

Githongo made international headlines in 2003 when President Mwai Kibaki — who had been elected in 2002 on a pledge to fight corruption — named him Kenya’s Permanent Secretary for Governance and Ethics.

Donor nations welcomed Mr Kibaki’s efforts to stamp out corruption and restored aid, which had been cut off under former President Daniel arap Moi’s long rule. The celebration, however, would be short lived.

In 2005, barely two years after taking the position, Githongo was back in the international spotlight, this time for resigning while on travel in England. Speculation was rampant about the reasons for his departure. Whatever the reason, his exit was seen as a serious blow to the government’s credibility.

The Standard, one of Kenya’s major national independent daily newspapers, called his resignation “a complete disaster for the president personally, the government as a whole, and the country in general.”
Since his dramatic departure from politics, Githongo has not retreated quietly into obscurity. He remains a vocal advocate of governance reform in Kenya and across Africa. In January 2006, Githongo released a report, outlining large-scale government fraud among Kenya’s political elite. In February, he met with a committee of Kenyan Members of Parliament in London to discuss his report. He recently visited IDRC headquarters in Ottawa, Canada to deliver a talk on anti-corruption.

A top-down approach

“There’s a saying used within the anti-corruption movement: A fish rots from the head,” says Githongo. “Corruption starts at the top. It never starts at the bottom.”

Much as corruption begins at the top and trickles down, effective anti-graft strategies must start at the highest level to be effective. “Ideally a country’s population uses elections to express its opposition to corruption. But in a situation where you’re coming out of systemic corruption, you have to start from the top down.”

However, simply replacing a “corrupt” leader does not mean that the problem will go away. To be truly effective, says Githongo, an anti-corruption strategy should be built on seven pillars: leadership and political will; institutional reforms; legal reforms; transitional justice measures addressing the past; the role of the private sector; the role of civil society and the media; and partnerships with the international community.

“In an ideal situation, there will be fundamental cultural reform where people begin to believe that corruption is not a way of life. Where they say ‘we don’t have to live like this. We are not going to tolerate this kind of behaviour.’ But in a situation where corruption has been systemic, it takes time to bring about [change].”

He’s compared the process of turning a government around to steering an oil tanker: you can rotate the wheel 180 degrees but it may take several kilometres before the entire vessel makes the turn.

It’s an upward battle, and a young one at that. The field of anti-corruption only emerged in the 1990s, while corruption itself has likely been around as long as governments have existed.

Today’s corruption includes the business class, politicians, bureaucrats, and the security sector. These “networks” are not only durable, they’re adaptable, which makes the job of fighting corruption extremely difficult for well-intentioned governments.

“Some of the most effective institutions in the world are criminal organizations. They globalize faster than governments can,” says Githongo. “Governments can’t keep up, partly because of their accountability. They have a deal with the public, which limits their ability to throw old policies out of the window and implement new ones.”

Increasingly, the international community is turning on corruption, and does not hesitate to penalize nations and governments that are suspected of questionable activity.
As recently as 1977, it was not illegal for American businesses operating in other countries to bribe foreign government officials. Today, international bodies such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the African Union have introduced conventions against corruption, and democratization across the continent is slowly removing the political structures favoured by corruption.

Despite these gains, the general perception in the West remains one of rampant corruption throughout Africa.

“I think it’s a few bizarre colourful characters — leaders who have captured the Western imagination and helped to parlay this impression of gross corruption in Africa,” says Githongo. “I don’t think that corruption is something inbuilt in culture. In general, in African countries, there’s great sensitivity with regard to corruption.”

Nadine Robitaille is a writer with IDRC's Communications Division