

ACTIVITY

How social and legal standards define the abuse of power

Stories

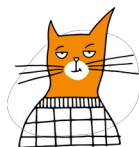
STORY 1: Chocolate-yardstick VS watch-yardstick

1) A young, promising politician is having a great career in politics. In fact, she is so influential and beloved in her party that she will probably become the next prime minister if her party wins the election. But instead, she becomes involved in a public scandal after it turns out that she used her government credit card to buy chocolate bars and other small personal items. Although no criminal or legal responsibility is recognized, she is forced to leave the party and must take a break from politics for the following three years.

2) A politician is appointed minister of infrastructure and transport. He continues to serve as minister even after a change of government. In the light of a corruption scandal, he gets under pressure to step down: he is not under investigation, but he has close ties with an indicted entrepreneur, who gave a 10,000 euro luxury watch as a gift to the minister's son. He is thus forced to resign.

For youth workers:

The behaviors of these two politicians had no criminal justice implications but have been judged according to social standards, i.e. based on what people living in the country consider acceptable or unacceptable for a public official to do. This can lead, as in the case of our stories, to social reactions or sanctions. In one country, it was enough to buy chocolate to be sanctioned. In the other country, it took a luxury watch paid for by someone else. The various perceptions of what is labeled as 'corruption' in different countries are not only a problem, but also an opportunity: if we recognise that certain acts



considered 'normal' in our country, region, or city are seen as 'corrupt' in another context, we are challenged in our beliefs and called to think about where we want to place our yardstick of acceptance (or rejection) of abuses of power.



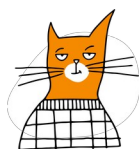
STORY 2: International corruption yesterday VS today

1) Since at least the 1990s, one of the world's largest electrical engineering companies has organised a global system of corruption to win projects and increase the company's prices, paying bribes to government officials and civil servants in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. The company is able to do this because the law in its country allows it: it can even deduct it from taxes, as long as those expenses are incurred abroad. Even after the law changes, corruption is an established business practice in the company, which continues its conduct until it is finally prosecuted and sanctioned by authorities with a billion-euro fine.

2) A well-known company imports oil to sell in the country and on the European market. The oil company has repeatedly been involved in corruption scandals in several countries in Africa and the Middle East: over the years it has bribed public officials to obtain oil exploitation rights, avoiding taxes and causing considerable environmental damage. Following investigations, it agrees to pay high penalties to settle the cases. Even though a settlement sentence in the countries' law is equivalent to a conviction, the company does not admit any guilt.

For youth workers:

Social standards are not carved in stone but can evolve and be redefined over time. What was just considered 'an ordinary business practice' yesterday, can be considered corruption today, and consequent sanctions can be applied. Imagine if you find out today that a fashion company has paid bribes abroad to avoid controls on child workers' poor conditions in their factories. Like many other consumers, you would probably 'sanction' the company by shaming it and no longer buying its clothes. The society would sanction the company through scandalisation in the media. Moreover, similar stories show how a shift in values and opinions in a society can lead to or support a change in the formal standards set by law. The bribery of foreign officials was not only socially acceptable but even tax-deductible in most OECD countries until the 1990s. The increasing global consensus against corruption thus brought many countries to follow the first legislative initiative by the





US to prohibit bribing foreign officials in 1977. It took around 20 years but in the end it was the moral and political debate that made it possible to change the law around the world.

