

Transparency International (TI) is the world's leading non-governmental anti-corruption organisation, addressing corruption and corruption risk in its many forms through a network of more than 100 national chapters worldwide.

Transparency International Global Health Programme's (TI GH) overall goal is to improve global health and healthcare outcomes for the benefit of all people, of all ages. It aims to achieve this by reducing corruption and promoting transparency, integrity and accountability within the pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors.

This grant is implemented by TI Global Health and TI Sweden together with TI chapters in Bangladesh, Uganda and Zambia

Just over a year ago, the roll out of the first COVID-19 vaccines signalled a light at the end of the pandemic tunnel – if vaccines could be distributed equally and quickly. Countries across the globe were suddenly faced with the massive logistical challenge of procuring and distributing vaccines to its population and mobilizing the necessary resources and personnel to do so.

So far, [10.6 billion](#) doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been administered globally. With each dose, individuals desperately seeking immunity to the virus – and a way to get back to work – have depended on a transparent and fair distribution system. The emergence of the recent Omicron variant is a testament to the urgent need for ensuring vaccine equity both globally as well as within countries. However, even when vaccines do make it to distribution points such as public clinics and hospitals, opportunities for corruption – including under-the-table-payments – might hinder some of the most vulnerable from receiving the vaccine. In some cases, the speed and scale of the vaccine delivery have come at the expense of the checks and balances needed to address and stop corruption.

ENDING THE PANDEMIC REQUIRES ADDRESSING CORRUPTION

According to [one of the few existing studies](#) of corruption in the COVID-19 vaccine deployment “the life and death issues associated with the virus and the involvement of the government in multiple stages of the development and dissemination of the vaccines have potentially created some unique avenues for corrupt transactions.”

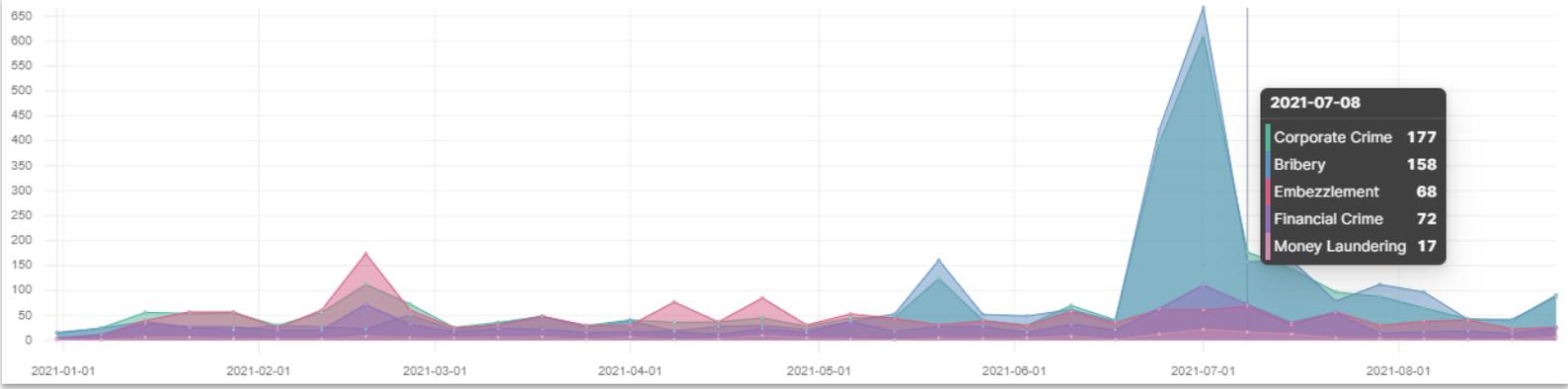
These [corruption risks](#) include the entry of substandard and falsified vaccines into markets, theft of vaccines within distribution systems, theft of emergency funding,

nepotism, and corrupted procurement systems. In Kenya, for example, corrupt Ministry of Health officials set up a network of cartels [selling donated COVID-19 vaccines](#) for as much as 20,000KES (around 177USD) per vial and [falsified AstraZeneca vaccines](#) have been found in Iran. A scandal that has been dubbed “[Vacuna-gate](#)” allowed Peru’s political elite to receive the vaccine months before the national roll out.

More recently, there have also been multiple accounts of false COVID-19 vaccination certificates being issued and sold in [Lesotho](#) and in [Romania](#). In Australia, patients have offered up to thousands of dollars in [bribes to medical doctors](#) in exchange for false certificates. Corruption in the delivery and distribution of vaccines – compounded with misinformation and distrust – could also damage the success of vaccination campaigns by [fuelling vaccine hesitancy](#). Without faith in a fair distribution process, the public may question public health guidelines and put the entire response at risk.

Cases of corruption in COVID-19 vaccine delivery need to be checked not just for fairness and equality, but also because of the nature of the virus – which can lead to unnecessary loss of life if at risk groups are prevented from receiving doses. Corruption is already known to have adverse effects on health in general, including undermining the delivery of basic healthcare services in an equitable manner, contributing to [poor health outcomes](#) and a [higher number of chronic diseases](#).

If we are to successfully respond to the pandemic, these corruption risks must be [identified and addressed](#) in order to safeguard access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, including for the most vulnerable and marginalized.



A NEW AI TOOL SPOTS CORRUPTION

Yet, the fast-moving vaccine deployment means that we currently have little insight into the scope and nature of corruption related to COVID-19 vaccines globally, and the limited information that does exist is mostly based on ad-hoc studies or reports coming in through reporting mechanisms such as toll-free hotlines.

To address this problem, Transparency International’s Global Health Programme and [Signal AI](#) – with funding from the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs – developed the Artificial Intelligence Monitoring tool, or AIMon, providing real-time global insights into corruption trends. The information can help key stakeholders such as governments and donors understand how and where corruption is affecting equitable access to health services such as COVID-19 vaccines.

AIMon scans hundreds of thousands of online news sites in real-time for any articles containing reports of corruption in the procurement and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines and helps uncover trends that can be unpicked instantly, across the globe. Identification, filtering and analysis of articles allows us to cluster based upon similarities or “themes”, such as in this case, the drivers and motivation for soliciting bribes. Data can be filtered for different types of corruption as well as by country and region.

Using machine learning, the tool is then trained to understand which articles are relevant to each of the chosen topics, allowing it to not only display results containing

keywords such as “COVID-19” and “bribery”, but also assessing the level of focus of each keyword within articles – something a simple search engine such as Google can’t do.

The data insights gained from AIMon can be used to inform policymakers’ anti-corruption programmes and to support dialogues with national, regional, and global stakeholders on current trends in corruption and the actions and resources needed to address them. It also enables governments, donors, and other stakeholders to identify synergies between current programming and recent reports on corruption in similar or related areas.

SHEDDING A LIGHT ON INEQUITY

A public and interactive map – powered by insights from AIMon – is currently being developed to allow users to visualize and explore cases of corruption and inequity in the vaccine rollout relevant to their organizations or research.

Without a thorough understanding of the scope and nature of corruption in the fast-paced vaccine deployment, we won’t be able to remove the barriers standing in the way of equitable vaccine access for many of the globe’s most poor and vulnerable communities.

Monthly reports highlighting corruption trends in the COVID-19 vaccine deployment can be found [here](#) – The tool can also be adapted to research other topics related to corruption both in the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.