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International Anti-Corruption Conference

Present at the Beginning

Preventing and detecting corruption against government are top priorities of every good public administration all over the world. With these common motivations and international efforts to deal with corrosion of public trust and resources, sharing ideas and methodologies has become essential. Because of the international movement of funds and illegal products, networking is a significant tool against corruption. International law enforcement anti-corruption conferences create opportunities for ongoing liaisons with others in this struggle. National borders are breached by corrupters and can be surmounted by anti-corruption forces.

In 1981, as the Inspector General of the District of Columbia, I, the Chief Investigator of the New York City Department of Investigation and the Executive Director of the Chicago Office of Municipal Investigation met in Hong Kong with the Commissioner and other officials of the Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption to discuss anti-corruption work in our respective offices. This fruitful exchange of ideas and procedures led to a decision to hold an expanded international conference. Our goals were to liaison and facilitate the flow of information between agencies and others concerned with prevention and investigation of corruption. As Inspector General for DC, I volunteered to chair the first conference in Washington in 1983.

Invitees to the First International Anti-Corruption Conference were from independent segments of the international community who worked to prevent and detect corruption. Speakers and attendees came from local, state and federal agencies in the United States, as well as academia and twelve international jurisdictions. The US federal presence included representatives from the Office of Government Ethics, Department of Justice, and the General Accounting Office. Offices of the Inspectors General from the Agency for International Development, General Services Administration, Small Business Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Education and the Department of Energy were also represented. The major themes that emerged from the presentations and discussions were:

- Accountability of managers and employees
- Cooperation between agencies and jurisdictions
- Prevention

The Second International Anti-Corruption Conference, in New York City in 1985, drew more than 200 participants from the United States and 32 other jurisdictions across the world. The major motifs were:

- Awareness of corruption
- Ethical, economic and legal effects of corruption
- Methods of prevention, sanctions and remedies for responding to corruption

During the second conference, particular emphasis was placed on private sector corruption, its impact on government and control mechanisms.

More than 250 delegates from 72 organizations and 32 countries met in Hong Kong in 1987 for the third international conference. The highlights were:

- The pervasive nature of corruption
- Its role as a component of major crimes throughout the world
- Measures to counter its pernicious influence on society

Several speakers elaborated on the need for an independent agency to investigate corruption. Hong Kong was a logical choice for this conference because abuses by the local police there had detrimentally affected their market economy, resulting in the creation of their agency. The Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption had three branches: audit, investigation and public relations, with outreach to the community through educational programs in the schools and publications for all ages.

Participants at the third conference, as had those at the first two sessions, agreed that these meetings were valuable and should be continued biannually in different countries. The fourth conference in 1989 was held in Sidney, Australia; the fifth in 1992 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands; the sixth in 1993 in Cancun, Mexico; the seventh in 1995 in Beijing, China; the eighth in 1997 in Lima, Peru; and the ninth in Durban, South Africa.

By the eighth conference in 1997, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, recognizing the insidiousness of corruption in their programs, joined with other organizations to work toward its prevention and detection.

From the beginning, one difficulty in arranging these conferences was the lack of a central clearinghouse. Transparency International assumed this role by 1997, and thereafter has been instrumental in coordinating global anti-corruption efforts.

And what have we learned from these meeting? T.S. Eliot in "Four Quartets, Little Gidding" wrote:

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

The first conference focused on accountability, cooperation and prevention. These themes persist. Although human nature dictates that corruption will not cease, dedication to coordinated prevention and detection with effective laws and essential resources will diminish the opportunities for and existence of this type of crime. Working together and sharing creative approaches remain keys to these accomplishments. 🏛️