“Garbage is Gold”: The Emerging Threat for Human Security

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Abstract: Corruption may be interpreted as adopting different theoretical perspectives privileging the individual, organizational or contextual dimension. The consequences of its widespread diffusion within human society have been typically linked to economic and social damages. In our contribution, we want to explore the relationship between the adoption of corruption practices and the impacts on human security. We claim that the effects of corruption cannot be limited to social and economic dimensions, since they may affect the quality of life and even on the human beings’ health conditions. To shed light on these effects, this paper first focuses on the analysis of corruption within the managerial debate. Second, we address the concept of human security by showing the possible overlapping areas. Finally, we present the results stemming from the analysis of a case study related to the illegal traffic of toxic waste from northern Italy to the Campania region. We adopt a qualitative research methodology, relying on official judiciary sources to develop and validate the concepts that are objects of our analysis.

Key words: corruption, human security, waste business

1. Introduction

Corruption is a catchall concept inherently coupled with the traits of collective endeavours and constantly present in human society regardless of political regimes, typologies of institutions, or the presence of public or private corporations. Being a multi-faceted yet elusive phenomenon, corruption has not received much attention in management studies so far. In fact, most of research on corruption is related to economic or sociological dimensions. Typically corruption has been studied and interpreted in the managerial domain as a pathological side effect that influences the performance of the firms and of the institutions in all economic systems. To this extent, Campos and Pradhan state that high levels of corruption determine harsh problems for economic and social development, not only in developing countries. They claim, for instance, that high levels of corruption negatively influence the role and the functioning of public institutions, local governments, and authorities.

This paper aims to understand the effects produced by corruptive practices on human security. In our analysis, we share the idea that the concept of human security, whose definition is still heavily debated, may be broadly related to the welfare of citizens considering a variety of different elements and interpreting it as an ambiguous and value laden notion.
In order to shed light on the effects produced by corruption on human security, we focus our analysis on the case of the illegal traffic of toxic waste from the northern Italy to the Campania region. We show how the widespread diffusion of corruptive practices involving different typologies of organizational actors, belonging to different institutional groups (professionals, white collars, business men, criminals),\(^8\)\(^9\) may produce effects that go far beyond the waste collection breakdown. We show how the intertwining of different corruptive relationships is the main cause of the social and environmental disaster that threatens the human security of one of the most crowded Italian regions. In particular, we point out the dangerous relationship between the ramified pervasiveness of criminal organizations in the business,\(^10\) the diffusion of corruptive practices, and the devastating effects both on the environment and on human security.

We adopt a qualitative research methodology, relying on official judiciary sources in order to develop and validate the concept's objects of analysis.

2. Corruption: From Social And Economic Issue To A Threat For Human Security

2.1 The concept of corruption within the managerial debate

The bulk of the available research on corruption is related to economic or sociological dimensions.\(^11\) Due to several big financial and economic scandals (for example, Worldcom, Enron, and Parmalat), the corruptive phenomenon has recently become a relevant topic within the managerial literature.\(^12\) In the post-Enron era, many researchers and executives have serious concerns regarding the reasons behind these scandals, corruptions, and white-collar crime.\(^13\)

The scheme illustrated in the introduction of the Special Issue of Academy of Management Review (2008, no. 3) distinguishes three main level of analysis:

1. The micro level;
2. The organizational level; and
3. The contextual level.

The first level (micro) focuses on individuals interpreting their behaviour as potentially bad apples.\(^14\) Corruption, in the words of Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi, can be defined in terms of departure from accepted societal norms, due to the need to pursue either individual or organizational gain.\(^15\) In this theoretical perspective, the diffusion of corruption within society and the economy can be explained as the failure of moral regard for the public interest in favour of illegitimate personal interest.\(^16\) Finally, Alpaslan et al. underline how corruption implies a deviance from moral values, raising questions and doubts regarding the morality or values of individuals, groups, and organizations.\(^17\)

The second level of analysis implies a change in perspective,\(^18\) adopting a macro approach, and looks at entire organizations as “bad barrels.”\(^19\) In particular, Lange underlines the presence of individual and organizational issues, arguing that corruption may be understood by focusing attention on the pursuit of individual interests by one or more organizational actors through the intentional misdirection of organizational resources or perversion of organizational
The adoption of an organizational perspective may provide new insights. First, as argued by Luo organizations represent (together with civil servants) the most important players in the game. The second critical issue refers to the possible countermeasures against corruption that can be carried out by an organization.

The third and final perspective refers to the role of context. In the literature, there are divergent opinions regarding the role of corruption within a social, cultural, and economic area. In fact, some authors think corruption presents the same characteristics everywhere, without any concrete relationship with context. In this sense, we may refer to the analysis of Banfield on the difference in corruption among different countries such as Germany, Greece, Denmark, and Italy.

In contrast, there are several authors who argue that social and economic issues represent a fundamental variable explaining the real features of the corruptive phenomenon. The challenge that we face consists of using this theoretical framework to interpret the impacts produced by corruption on human security. In this light, we analyse what happened in Campania in the waste disposal industry. However, before that, we need to clarify the concept of human security.

### 2.2 Human Security

The concept of human security, whose definition is still heavily debated, is related to the welfare of citizens against a broad range of threats. Its interpretation is an ambiguous and value-laden notion, characterized by a broad spectrum of nuances.

King and Murray define human security as a panel of key issues, including well-being, poverty, health, education, political freedom, and democracy. Following the same theoretical stream, Bajpai argues that, within a hypothetical “human security audit,” we should include measures of direct and indirect threats to individual bodily safety and freedom.

Both theoretical reconstructions of human security share the imprinting given in 1994 by the United Nations’ Human Development Report, which focused explicitly on the topic of human security. The core idea therein was that human security depends not only physical security but also is intertwined with issues related to the quality of human life and health.

The official UNDP report is very useful even because it provides a formal indication of the key dimensions of the concept of human security: a) it is universal; b) the components of human security are interdependent; c) human security is best ensured through prevention; and d) human security is people-centric. Finally, the identification of the main threats of human security is useful because it gives a clear insight into the extreme heterogeneity of the concept, including several dimensions listed in the UNDP report: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security. In this theoretical model, human security is coupled with a threat to collective welfare.

Along the same lines with what Paris defines as the laundry list, Nef presents a fivefold cataloguing scheme, distinguishing: 1) environmental, personal, and physical security, (2) economic security, (3) social security, including “freedom from discrimination based on age, gender, ethnicity, or social status,” (4) political security, and (5) cultural security, or “the set of psychological orientations of society geared to preserving and enhancing the ability to control
uncertainty and fear.” Contemporarily, Reed and Tehranian provide a different list of crucial dimensions constituting the idea of human security as the importance of psychological security and of the idea of perception of freedom.

In our search for the meaning of the concept of human security, we may underline the wide range of possible articulations of the concept. In fact, human security lies at the intersection among different issues and dimensions, including the provision of “basic material needs” and the provision of the minimal guarantee for human dignity.

This argument is consistent with theoretical insights provided by Bedeski, and leads towards the inclusion in the human security domain of the totality of knowledge, technology, institutions, and activities that protect, defend, and preserve the biological existence of human life.

2.3 The Impact of Corruption on Human Security: Lessons from the Waste Disposal Industry

In recent years, a variety of research contributions have been proposed in order to explain the impact of corruptive practices on human security. In particular we aim at building on previous work done by Passas and D’Amato & Zoli, who have addressed issues related to the harmful consequences of corruption in the waste disposal industry. As Passas has shown, multiple cases were reported in which firms have provoked environmental damages by dumping dangerous waste and being closely connected with criminal intermediaries and unfaithful public administration. Block and Scarpitti and Rebovich reported on U.S. toxic waste disposal in the 1990s, and more recently Liddick has discussed how criminal groups are present in the international traffic of garbage and dangerous waste. In Italy, criminal organizations tightly control the disposal of both urban and hazardous waste. According to the figures from Legambiente, the illegal waste business in Italy boasts a turnover of 7 billion Euros in 2009, with millions of tons of hazardous waste illegally disposed. In Southern Italy, it has been shown that wide area of free land and territory have been transformed into illegal landfill sites, with serious implications for the environment and human health. This dangerous situation may be defined as the outcome of complex interactions among a variety of stakeholders: local governments, organised crime, and firms, each of them obtaining useful resources from illegal waste management. For example, local politicians obtain votes and territorial consensus from criminal organizations, which in turn are allowed to dispose of waste, while firms may cut industrial costs of more expensive waste treatment. Previous research has called for empirically grounded research on this subject. Following D’Amato and Zoli, it is high time that scholars provided thorough accounts on the corruptive and criminal practices in the waste cycle and their effects on public health and human security.

More specifically, our contribution aims to broaden the scientific debate related to the interpretation of human security as environmental, personal, and physical security, focusing our analysis on the drivers that covertly threaten the level of human security.

By referring to a consolidated framework of corruption within the managerial literature, we show how human security is not threatened by the “wrong” and corrupted behaviour of the single corrupt professional or politician, but by an articulated and intertwined net of corrupted practices that involve different typologies of actors.
The entire theoretical debate is linked to the idea of preservation and protection of human security. In this light, it is important to link corruption practices and human security in a new and stimulating way in order to understand the factors that threaten human security and also provide practitioners with new theoretical insights.

3. Methodology

Prior definition of human security helps us to understand the real effects that stem from a widespread diffusion of corruption practices. In fact, the traditional effects associated with corruption evoke the idea of economic and social weaknesses. But what happens when this deep net of corruptive phenomena develops within an industry crucial for human wellbeing? What happens when the waste removal industry is deeply corrupted and deeply influenced by corruptive phenomena that represent a failure of moral regard for the public interest in favour of illegitimate personal interest?

To understand the effects of corruption on human security, we decided to focus on the case of the toxic waste illegal traffic from northern Italy to Campania region. We show how the widespread diffusion of corruptive practices involving different actors may affect human security. The adoption of corrupt business practices for profit are the main causes of the social and environmental disaster that threatens human security in the Campania region.

We adopt a qualitative research methodology, relying on official judiciary sources in order to develop and validate the analysis. Notably, our work is supported by leading Italian magistrates actively engaged in combating the penetration of criminal firms into legitimate businesses.

Interviews with members of a panel composed of Italian magistrates helped identify the most relevant judicial cases in which criminal organizations penetrated legal businesses in Italy over the last 20 years. Interviews took place between January 2009 and December 2012. We adopted an informal, conversational interview style, without preset questions, in order to remain as open and adaptable as possible to the interviewee’s opinions and conceptual framing.

4. Case Study

The case analyses firms controlled by criminal organizations that dumped toxic materials over a period of many years in an illegal site in the Campania region. The business of illegal toxic waste traffic traditionally attracts criminal organizations for a variety of reasons: strong private demand (thanks to the price competition guaranteed by criminal firms); a very localized service (which is facilitated by the exploitation of the military control of territories achieved by clans); a low-value-added business (which favours the modest entrepreneurial abilities of criminal organizations); and finally, the capacity to use intimidation and corruption on politicians and institutions.

In Italy, mafia-type organisations have engaged in a complex relationship with corporations, businessmen, and (local) authorities because of growing demand for cheaper services, the business ethic of some Italian industry segments, low public awareness, and delay in policy implementation. We analyse the process and the strategy criminal clans adopted in order to manage illegal toxic waste traffic during the 1990s in the Campania Region, an area that has
since been considered a national dump site. We conclude the analysis of the case by describing some of the main disastrous consequences on environment and health of the resident population.

4.1 The Waste Business

Through the analysis of the judiciary trials and other official documents, we could point out a strong presence of criminal organizations in the illegal toxic waste traffic. Nowadays, different judiciary inquiries focused on the crime of illegal toxic waste traffic number almost 200 (as defined by the art. 260 Dlgs 152/2006, ex art. 53 bis Ronchi Law). The number of the public prosecutors offices involved in these enquiries is 85 and all the different polices forces active in Italy provided their services: Corpo forestale dello Stato, Guardia di Finanza, Polizia di Stato, Direzione investigativa antimafia, Capitanerie di porto, Agenzia delle Dogane, Carabinieri. These figures depict a clear picture of the economic and social relevance of the phenomenon: 22 nations involved, almost 700 firms, and 3,400 people reported. During 2010, police forces in Italy sequestered almost 2 million tons of special and toxic waste. Legambiente, one of the most important association devoted to the defence and protection of the external environment, concluded that criminal organizations’ revenues from toxic waste disposal have been steadily increasing in the last few years, reaching a turnover of 20 billion euros in 2012.

According to many prosecutors, the Casalesi family is a criminal organization involved heavily in the garbage-disposal industry – especially in the handling of dangerous waste from other Italian regions.

During the last twenty years, criminal firms and criminal organizations adapted tools, techniques, and strategies to enter into this business, flourishing ever since. This result is easily represented by one of the last prosecution against Francesco Bidognetti, a boss of the Casalesi family in jail since 1993 in Parma, who is accused of having poisoned water tables near Naples after illegally dumping more than 800,000 tons of garbage – in large part toxic – produced by companies in northern Italy. As described by Domenico Bidognetti (an informer) during a questioning (8 October 2007): “Ecologia ’89 by Gaetano Cerci (chosen as front man) was created thanks to Francesco Bidognetti, at the end of the eighties, and the birth of that firm marks the beginning of the clan involvement in the waste business.”

The way the business was run is simple: a firm connected with criminal organizations has the role of trader between industrial firms located in the northern part of Italy (that have to manage their toxic waste) and other local firms situated in the Campania Region who are in charge of managing their waste (these firms manage dumps, and the most important were run by Gaetano Vassallo and Cipriano Chianese). Technically, this kind of waste should be treated cautiously and in a very sophisticated and expensive way; criminal firms do not have this “care” and in this way they could provide service at a really competitive price. This kind of service has a very high price if managed legally, so it becomes extremely convenient for northern firms to buy this service from criminal firms, allowing them to increase their market shares while criminal organizations received their bribes. Within this illegal mechanism, politicians play an important role. Typically, politicians intervene when criminal firms (both the trader or those which manage dumps) need public authorizations in order to run their business. In exchange, politicians receive bribes and are given involvement in personnel hiring decisions, providing
them the chance to grow their electoral base. The penetration of criminal firms is also supported by civil servants in charge of controlling and repressing irregularities in the process. They often represent a puppet to be manipulated or easily corrupted. The business is a perfect example of non-zero sum games, where all the players have their advantages in participating, but at the expense of the health and welfare of Campania citizens.

After entering the business, criminal firms had a “smart” idea to make more profits, transforming garbage in gold. In the past, criminal firms adopted authorized and legal dumps to dispose the waste. Since 1992, they started adopting illegal sites (sites that were not supposed to be used as dumps) rather than the legal dumps (that were a formal mask for transport). Among many other illegal sites, Vassallo (another informer) refers to an area near Castel Volturno where a famous night club was built.

Another example of trader firms is CTM 2000, which specialized in the toxic waste traffic with firms located in Lombardia region. Unfortunately, the trial documents are full of similar examples with industrial firms located in Tuscany, Veneto, and other regions. The role of criminal organizations was clear: in order to deposite toxic waste in illegal sites, criminal firms needed the “authorization” coming from clans. These organizations, employ a military-like control of territories that gives them enormous freedom in these areas. It is useful to refer to a realistic description by lacuelli, who argues that while walking within the triangle of Villaricca-Giugliano-Qualiano, the real situation becomes immediately obvious: many landfills never surveyed suddenly become new illegal buildings. The most terrible aspect, argues lacuelli, is represented by the fact that criminal organizations do their dirty job in the daylight, conscious of the worried silence of the local population.43

A plurality of criminal clans are involved in the business. In the early 90s, the most relevant is the Bidognetti clan, which provided several services: technical skills and machines owned by a white-collar clan member; bank guarantees; the physical intimidation needed to obtain the control of the area; mediation with other clans active in different areas (if the dumps were located in other areas they need the authorization of the clan who controlled that area); mediation with politicians and civil servants; and, finally, control over personnel and limitation of the trade union’s role.

Interpreting these results underlines how the three dimensions are perfectly intertwined. First, there is the corrupt behaviour of individuals who discard the ethical and moral conduct to pursue personal economic and power interests.

Second, criminal firms represent a clear sign of corruption and unethical behaviour, being run (under an apparently licit entity) by criminal organizations which use them for money laundering and for investing their huge profits.

Finally, the whole context is deeply influenced by corruptive practices: the number of professionals who decide to accept a small bribe is very high. In reading the judiciary acts, it is our impression that for a long time the use of corruption was the only code of conduct.
4.2 The Environmental Situation in Campania

In the Campania region, the Commissariat initiated the contaminated sites census in 1996 and by 2008 it was estimated that there were as many as 2551 sites contaminated by the illegal waste management in the region. The most affected area in Campania is “Lands of Fire” (named for the columns of smoke rising from illegal waste burning) that covers three municipalities in the Naples area (Qualiano, Giugliano and Villaricca). This is a frequent phenomenon in Campania where there are about 17 illegal fires burn every day.

Regarding civic health effects, the Campania Mortality Atlas (2007) provides interesting and alarming insights. From 1998-2001, the primary cause of illness was cardiovascular related (40% of men, 50% of women), followed by those related to tumours (30% of men, 21% of women). The primary cause of mortality for young people was tumours being directly linked to exposure to contamination from waste. Respiratory illnesses like bronchitis and asthma are also increasing. The data are confirmed by the analysis of Antonio Marfella (Istituto Tumori Pascale di Napoli) who points out the significant increase in the number of tumour diseases in the Provinces of Naples and Caserta.

The presence of waste has frequently been recognised as an important health risk. In 2004, the Department of Civil Protection implemented a study on waste impacts in Campania. The project was coordinated by the World Health Organisation’s European Environmental and Health Centre, with the participation of the National Research Council (Clinic Physiology Institute – Epidemiology department, Pisa), the High Institute of Health (Department Environment and Prevention), the Regional Epidemiological Observatory, ARPAC, the Campania Tumour Record, the Campania Congenital Malformation Record, and the Local Health Agencies of the territories involved.

Twenty types of tumours and 11 typologies of congenital malformation described in the scientific literature were found and linked to the presence of dumpsites and incinerators. The landfills and dumps of the two provinces of Caserta and Napoli were mapped and studied, with 226 sites, most of them illegal, identified and classified according to the level of risk present.

There are several research works focused on the correlations between health and waste, testing the hypothesis that the high rates of mortality and malformation are concentrated in areas contaminated by waste. Increases of 9% in deaths of men and 12% in women as well as an increase of 84% of lymphoma and sarcoma tumours of the stomach and lungs, and genital malformations were measured.

The Neapolitan area between the municipalities of Acerra, Nola, and Marigliano became known as The “Triangle of Death,” due to increases in cancer and mortality in recent years. In the Land of Fires area, cancerous tumours have also increased by 30% in the last five years, following the growth in the number of illegal landfills. This figure may be understood more deeply if we are conscious of the fact that corrupt practices show up at a context level, as we showed through the description of the case study. The main consequence is that the effects on human security levels do not depend on the single act or practice of corruption but on the widespread diffusion of this kind of behaviour.
The problems that stem from this illegal practice goes beyond contact with waste and its airborne emissions, since in Campania citizens also struggle with the problem of contamination of local sources of water and food production, condemning also agricultural productions in the region.54

If we have to cope with an altered and polluted environment that directly threatens the health and the life conditions of huge masses of people, we have to understand that this depend on the diffusion of corrupt practices.

5. Conclusions

The case study creates a link between corruption practices and effects on human security. The cooperation of criminal organizations, politicians, legal firms, and professionals creates an explosive mixture that directly impacts human security.

The discussion provides challenging and interesting insights for the future theoretical development within the debate focused on human security. The systematic diffusion of corrupt practices and lack of respect for the public interest produces consequences that go far beyond the simple waste of money or wealth and directly affects human security. By looking at the role played by different typologies of actors (criminal organizations and criminal firms that are naturally inclined in a corruptive behaviour) we may be able to unveil a hidden and dangerous picture. Surprisingly, the role and the behaviour of politicians and civil servants should protect public interest; however, our findings suggest that these elements have become intertwined with the corruption mechanism. At the same level of responsibility, we found firms deliberately employed illegal waste removal practices in an effort to achieve profit, at the expense of the public good. In addition, the role played by criminal clans is crucial: they control firms and professionals. In other words, clans organize consensus, influence politicians, and handle entrepreneurs to gain a personal economic advantage, all of which leads to environmental degradation.

Finally, referring to the three levels of corruption as reported in the theoretical section, our analysis shows how corruption started at an organizational level. Moreover, after the initial stage, criminal firms created a “new” business where clans played a key role. In this sense, the widespread adoption of these illegal practices is validated by the number of trials, implying two different and related effects. The first one is the transition from the organizational to the contextual level of the corruption level: it was not just a single case, it was a common way of doing business. The other one is how this corrupted context had dramatic effects on the health system, influencing directly the degree of human security.

The new frontier for practitioners and scholars of human security – interpreted in the sense of environmental, personal, and physical security – could be represented by the analysis of the diffusion of the social and economic drivers of corruptive practices. Future research on this subject is needed to understand antecedents, processes, and outcomes of interactions among the different levels of analysis of corruption and their implications for human security. In particular, a complete understanding of the pervasiveness of this phenomenon is still far from being achieved; to this extent, we believe that the fragmentation of the current research
streams into different levels of analysis might fruitfully be overcome by opening up the debate and putting it at the centre of current managerial attention.

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**Notes**


12 See, for example, Academy Management Review, n° 33, 2008.


52 Id., Corona and Franzini, 2009. Id., Fazzo et al., 2006.
54 Id., Corona and Franzini, 2009. Id., Fazzo et al., 2006.


Bibliography


