Looking at this year’s Corruption Perceptions Index, few would fail to recognize corruption as a central major threat facing humanity, one that destroys lives and communities and undermines countries and institutions. And people are more aware of the cost of corruption, generating anger that threatens to further destabilise societies and exacerbate violent conflicts.

Among the countries scoring very poorly in the Index, many are failed states characterised by the repression of human rights, social inequality and ingrained poverty. This year’s index also highlights the persistence of entrenched networks, and the continuing impunity that allows illicit behaviour to go unpunished.

The Corruption Perceptions Index scores countries on a scale from 0 (very corrupt) to 100 (very clean). While no country has a perfect score, the majority of countries score below 50, indicating a serious corruption problem. This translates into human suffering, with poor families being extorted for bribes to see doctors or to get access to clean drinking water. Equally damaging is the failure of basic services such as education, or essential infrastructure, because public money is being skimmed off by corrupt leaders. Corruption amounts to a dirty tax, one that hits the poorest and most vulnerable.

Countries at the top of the index, while not perfect, are generally characterised by a transparent and responsive public sector, and strong institutions including the judiciary, and where there are reliable means of holding public officials to account.

Governments need to integrate anti-corruption actions into all aspects of public decision-making. Priorities to reduce the exposure to corruption risks, include better rules on lobbying and political financing, making public spending and contracting more transparent, and making public bodies more accountable to people.
After a year with a global focus on corruption, we expected more governments to take a
tougher stance against the abuse of power. The Corruption Perceptions Index results
demonstrate that there are still a large number of societies and governments that need to give
a much higher priority to this issue.

The many countries mired in economic crisis should see their scores as a clarion call and a
tool to demand a more transparent public sector. And it must be our duty to see that that call
does not go unanswered.

Emerging economies that will spend billions on infrastructure should also take heed. The
construction of vital infrastructure, a 1.7 trillion dollar industry that involves heavy costs and
complex, opaque structures is highly vulnerable to abuse and corruption.

And as the world mobilises huge sums to renew the fight against poverty, after the
Millennium Development Goal deadline of 2015, and with hundreds of billions being spent to
respond to climate change, we cannot afford to let corruption be a roadblock to progress on
issues that affect the entire world.

But these are just some of the challenges the world faces today. We could name many more.

And it is precisely because of this human impact and the cross-border nature of the problem,
that it is so important to pursue global solutions, through the United Nations Convention
against Corruption, the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, and the G20’s anti-corruption action
plan.

The G20’s new anti-corruption action plan, in particular, will put greater emphasis in 2013-
2014 on tackling public sector corruption, signalling political will to combat the problem at
the highest levels.

It is also vital that we take a comprehensive approach to tackling corruption. It does not exist
on its own, but rather as a nexus of illicit trade and money flows, organised crime, as well as
direct intimidation - and sometimes murder - of those brave enough to speak out on
corruption and related issues such as the global drug trade.
But there are positive developments from around the world – with emerging solutions. New laws are granting citizens access to information about public institutions, and offering protection for people who blow the whistle on corruption.

And the private sector is slowly being transformed by regulations that require greater transparency in their dealings with governments, particularly in the lucrative and historically opaque business of extracting minerals, oil and gas.

But for all these positive developments, the real question is whether these measures will be applied systematically, and not just abandoned to collect dust.

Corruption in all its facets thrives on secrecy and on the perception by the corrupt that they are somehow above the law. We must ensure that there are real consequences to corruption. “No to impunity” cannot just be a slogan – it must be carried out with all our combined strength and inspire citizens to speak up and to no longer tolerate corruption.