Governance: Combating corruption

Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, Nigeria and Tanzania

Corruption prevents economies and societies from functioning optimally. It affects the quality of both public and private services, and fuels political instability and social disunity. While we cannot resolve all the corruption in a country with a single intervention, we can begin to shift the dial by targeting specific behaviours in specific governance contexts and systems.

Strengthening the integrity of government contractors and civil servants and in Colombia, Argentina and Mexico

In 2016, BIT launched a three-country programme of work with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office to support the governments of Colombia, Argentina and Mexico in tackling high-priority corruption issues.

In Colombia, a national scandal erupted in 2016 over the school meals programme Programa de Alimentación Escolar. Evidence emerged that paid government contractors were providing inadequate quantities of food to school children, while deceiving parents and the government by taking photos of children with plates full of food. To address this issue, we partnered with the Colombian President's Office, the National Planning Department and the Inter-American Development Bank.

We designed a monitoring intervention with two components:

1. SMS to encourage parental monitoring of the school meals programme; and

2. Weekly audits of food quality and quantity in schools by specially hired contractors.

We first wanted to find out what kinds of text messages would engage parents in monitoring the provision of meals at their child's school. Over five weeks, we iteratively tested different message designs with five rapid RCTs. Based on the statistically significant response rates listed below, we ended up with five principles for engaging parents in monitoring (see Figure 3 for an example message):

*   Send personalised messages (rather than generic) – 27 per cent higher response rate.

*   Ask closed questions (rather than open questions), e.g. "Did your child eat X?" – 163 per cent higher response rate.

*   Name three food items the child should have eaten (rather than one item), e.g. "Did your child eat rice, broccoli and beans?" – 59 per cent higher response rate.

*   Send messages about the parent's own child's food (rather than thousands of similar children) – 32 per cent higher response rate.

*   Send messages in the morning (rather than afternoon) – 45 per cent higher response rate.

Figure 3. Example message to parents (translated)
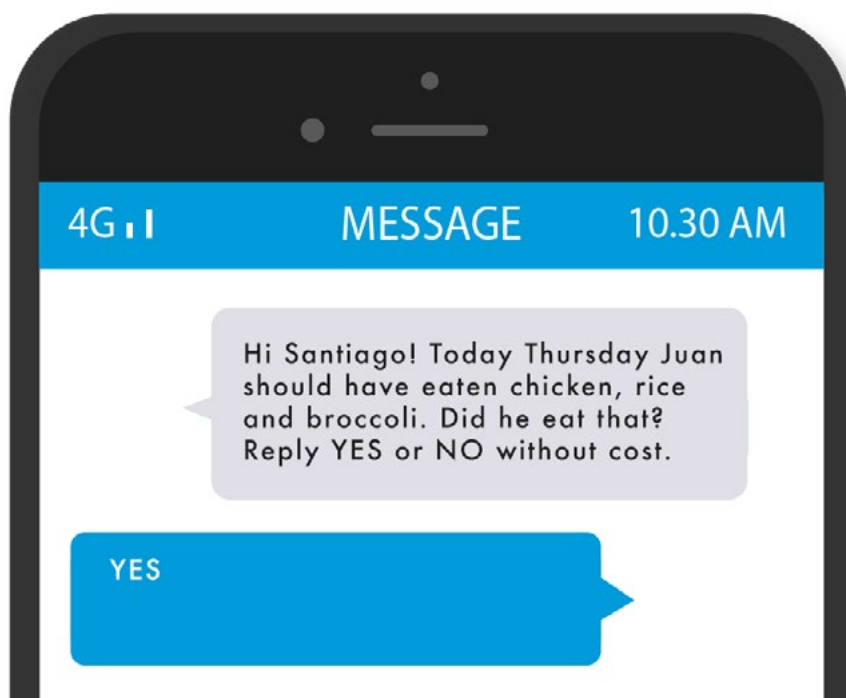
We then conducted an RCT with 213 schools to test the combined effect of weekly text messages to parents and food audits in schools. We did not find a statistically significant difference between treatment schools and control schools when we looked at (1) the quantity and quality of the food provided and (2) parents' satisfaction with the school meals programme.

One limitation of our experiment was that only five companies were contracted to provide meals to both the treatment and the control schools. This could have caused spillover effects whereby contractors improved their performance in control schools because they had experienced increased monitoring in treatment schools. We therefore conducted an exploratory before-and-after analysis, which found an increase in compliance with the audits among treatment schools. Given that this is not an experimental effect, we cannot infer causality. However, we consider this to be strong suggestive evidence that merits further testing.

You can find the results of our work in Argentina and Mexico on our website – soon to be published.