

Jack Blum: One of the most significant things I did in the 2000s was I was invited to join a group of NGOs that were coming together to meet with a number of governments, and this was all led by Norway.

Naomi Fowler: This is the Corruption Diaries from the Tax Justice Network. I'm Naomi Fowler.

Jack Blum: The Norwegians were part of something called the Leading Group, and the Leading Group was supposed to be the group of UN countries that would together work on the project of eliminating abject poverty around the world by, I think the deadline was 2030, and the question was how would they go about doing it.

Naomi Fowler: The Leading Group assembled to address many issues, of which tax collection emerged as a significant area that could help in addressing poverty worldwide.

Jack Blum: The Norwegians very sensibly said the issue of coming up with more assistance didn't make much sense until we began to look at the issue of corruption and look at the issue of tax collection. Both corruption and tax collection were high up on the list. And if you looked at some of the world's poorest countries, the issue of corruption was really high on the list.

So if you looked at countries like Angola or Equatorial Guinea, you could see that the bulk of the population was living in super abject, abject poverty. The people at the top of the heap were living high with mansions and many other places and the good life. We began holding meetings in Oslo and there were in attendance, oh, probably a dozen people who were working on the issues from around the world. And this included people from tax justice people from other NGOs that were concerned with poverty and corruption and those matters.

These meetings were very productive. The problem was that while the Norwegians were very eager to push forward and wanted to develop more ideas and information about it, it wasn't at all clear that other participants on the national level were that eager.

The best thing that came out of those meetings was the fact that the people from the various NGOs actually got to know each other and began cooperating in ways that hadn't really occurred before. That led to something that evolved, which was an organization of all of these anti corruption and anti tax evasion groups into a group that would meet regularly and coordinate activities globally. Because until now, most of this kind of work was being done at a national level and the amount of communication among the different countries and among the different groups worldwide simply wasn't happening. So we got to a point where an umbrella group was set up in Washington. It was set up through an organization that I'd been involved with, the Center for International Policy, and this was an offshoot. It actually started out as part of something called Global Financial Integrity but moved to this other umbrella organization and they would have regular meetings internationally to bring together the NGO world. And that included aid organizations, groups like Christian Aid and people of that order. Global Witness was part of it. And suddenly people were talking about a lot of things that had not been on the agenda before. For example, understanding really what was going on in the different countries and how for example, the U.K. and the U.S. were harboring assets of

people who were ripping off their own countries. Global Witness in particular had focused in on Equatorial Guinea and the Obiang family and the son of the President having a mansion in California, having a collection of million dollar racing cars, a private jet, and all of this stuff was pretty much not being discussed, the notion of the U.S. as being the place where these crooks banked was something that people didn't want to have on the table, but now it began to be on the table. And we began also to generate some interest in the Congress, particularly in the Permanent Investigation Subcommittee chaired by Carl Levin who began to hold hearings on bankers and others who were supporting these corrupt heads of state and their banking needs in terms of ripping off their own countries. Organization continued and, and parts of it continue to this day, but the contact between the different NGOs has, has certainly continued. I should also add that Norway pressed ahead and pushed the UN to hold annual gatherings of corruption fighters.

And at one point I actually attended a meeting of the leading group in Tokyo and spoke to the Leading Group. The thing that most struck me about that meeting was people from the Food and Agricultural Organization based in Rome were part of the conversation because the question of feeding all the world's people is a basic question when it comes to discussing poverty elimination. And they were talking about all the money that would be needed for research, and the money that would be needed for investment to be able to produce the crops, that would be able to support between 7 and 9 billion people, which was the estimate then of the world's potential top population. Well, the food and agricultural guy went on and on about the different needs, and how much money was needed, and how they didn't have it, and on and on and on. He finishes his speech to the organization and I come around and come up to him afterwards and I said, gee, I'm really appalled. You talked about all of the problems and all of the needs for capital and the needs for training people and so forth and you didn't once mention the global companies that control the grain trade, the global companies that are really directing investment and development as far as agriculture is concerned. And how is it possible to even have the kind of conversation on the subjects you're talking about without bringing up those companies and their role and the fact that this trade is largely un-understood by anybody, and most of the trading goes on in the dark of night, and who knows? Are prices fixed? How do the markets work? They're not properly supervised. Why don't you talk about it? And he said, oh, that's, that's really too dangerous a topic to get into, we, we really stay away from trying to take on these companies. Well, that, that spoke very much to why we are in the mess we're in and why some of the international organizations aren't working terribly well.

Naomi Fowler: The Corruption Diaries is a production of The Tax Justice Network, made by Naomi Fowler and Jo Barratt. Interviews with Jack Blum were recorded over several days at Jack's home in Maryland by Zoe Sullivan.