

## Corruption in South Africa: from moral high ground to a very slippery slope (by Penny Hoets, a director of *futurefact*)

It all starts with the little things - things where we say to ourselves, well that's not so bad, everyone else is doing it so why shouldn't I?

So, just what is and what isn't acceptable to South Africans\*?

What about dropping rubbish in the street? Something that seems relatively trivial in the greater South African hierarchy of crime and corruption. In 2000 89% of us said this was never acceptable, 9% sometimes and 2% said it was OK. By 2008 21% (3,8-million) of us freely admitted to having dropped rubbish in the street in the past 12 months - that is a lot of cool drink cans, plastic bags, fast food wrappers etc. It is justified on cultural grounds, on grounds that there are no rubbish bins, on the grounds that it creates jobs for people .. but we end up with rubbish strewn in the veld, in our streets and with plastic bags hanging from barbed wire fences and razor and trees and being rechristened as our national flower. Is discarded rubbish our own home-grown version of New York's broken window syndrome?

How many of us have phoned in to work saying we're sick (when we're not) so that we can stay home with a sick child, to watch a sports match, recover from a hangover or simply because we don't feel like going that day? In 2000, 13% of us said this was sometimes OK and 3% said it was OK. By 2008 12.7% of us had actually **done** this in the past 12 months. But no matter how we justify it to ourselves and how virtuous our reasons, this is actually fraud ... we are defrauding our employers out of our services for which we have been paid.

Driving in an emergency lane? So how bad is that? Our taxis do it all the time and clearly regard the space behind the yellow line as a taxi lane (and there is no doubt it is preferable to their other practice of driving in the same lane as oncoming traffic). Well, 11.2% of South Africans have driven in the emergency lane in the past 12 months (while only 3% believed it was OK to do so in 2000) and 15% haven't stopped at a stop street.

Bribing a traffic officer to avoid a large fine? Well, so he/she did say that he/she was thirsty/hungry. But 10% of us admitted to having paid a traffic officer to let us off a fine in the last 12 months - that's 1,9 million people. Substantially higher than the 2,5% who felt it was OK or 8,6% who thought it was sometimes OK back in 2000.

Bribing someone to get a contract or job produces a similar picture. In 2008 8% said they'd done it in the last 12 months. In 2000 12% said this was sometimes OK and 4,6% generally OK.

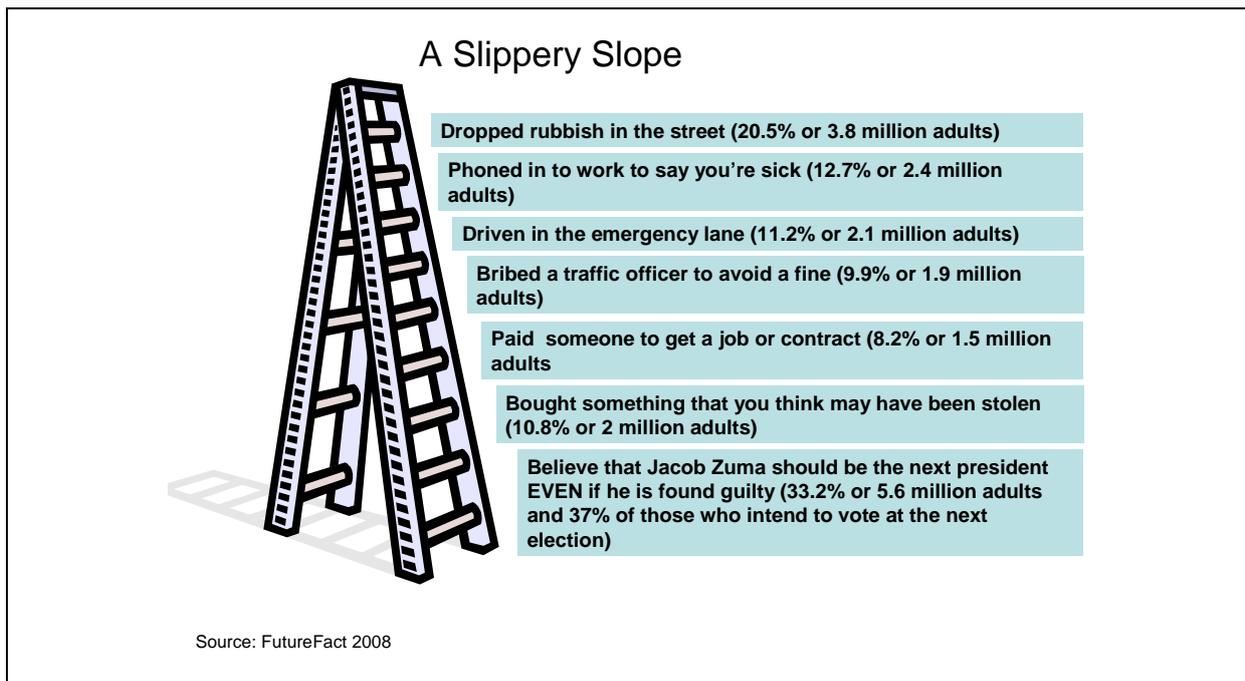
What about buying goods that you believe may have been stolen? Astonishingly, this appears to be quite a grey area. In 2000 13% of us thought it was sometimes OK and 7% generally OK to buy stolen goods. By 2008, 11% (that represents 2 million adults) admitted to having bought something that could have been stolen. How many of these purchasers are those who berate government for failing to reduce crime? How many have considered how many people (including their own friends and family members) were beaten up, hijacked, raped or murdered during these thefts? Scary isn't it? Especially when you consider that in 2006, 45% of South Africans (52% in 2000) felt that people who steal out of hunger should be helped and not sent to jail. In 2008 24% of us believed that poor people had no option but to steal.

There is no doubt that the majority of South Africans (around of 90% of us on average) are generally law-abiding and reject the type of behavior described above.

But, even if we are generally honest and ethical as individuals, 68% of us (compared with 58% in 2000) believe that as a nation South Africans are generally corrupt and dishonest. 70% also felt that people commit crimes in South Africa because they know they are not likely to get caught (or should that be extended to caught and then brought to trial and found guilty?).

So, where does that leave us when it comes to our politicians? 86% of us (up from 80% in 2000) still vainly hope, despite all evidence to the contrary, that government or state officials who are guilty of corruption or crime should not be allowed to hold office again. In 2006, 76% believed that if Jacob Zuma was found guilty of corruption he should go to jail. By 2008 only 56% felt that if Jacob Zuma was found guilty he should NOT become the next president while 33.2% (5.6 million adults) felt he should be president, even if guilty (11% were not sure). To compound this, 74% of adults said that they intended to vote at the next election and of these 37.3% (5.2 million) said that they would vote for Jacob Zuma even if he was found guilty at his trial.

It all comes down to what US presidential speechwriter Michael Gerson described as “the soft bigotry of lowered expectations”. If we as a nation have come to believe that we are dishonest and corrupt there is little incentive to behave in a moral and ethical fashion. There is also little reason for our politicians and leaders to do so since the electorate no longer expects it of them.



\* Source FutureFact Surveys carried out between 2000 to 2008, based on probability samples of at least 2,500 adults aged 16 years and over throughout the country (other than in small communities of fewer than 500 people). The next FutureFact survey will be conducted in September 2009. See [www.futurefact.co.za](http://www.futurefact.co.za)