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Subject:	Fw: Web Sites Shine Light on Petty Bribery Worldwide

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March 6, 2012

Web Sites Shine Light on Petty Bribery Worldwide

By STEPHANIE STROM

The cost of claiming a legitimate income tax refund in Hyderabad, India? 10,000 rupees.

The going rate to get a child who has already passed the entrance requirements into high school in Nairobi, Kenya? 20,000 shillings.

The expense of obtaining a driver's license after having passed the test in Karachi, Pakistan? 3,000 rupees.

Such is the price of what Swati Ramanathan calls "retail corruption," the sort of nickel-and-dime bribery, as opposed to large-scale graft, that infects everyday life in so many parts of the world.

Ms. Ramanathan and her husband, Ramesh, along with Sridar Iyengar, set out to change all that in August 2010 when they started ipaidabribe.com, a site that collects anonymous reports of bribes paid, bribes requested but not paid and requests that were expected but not forthcoming.

About 80 percent of the more than 400,000 reports to the site tell stories like the ones above of officials and bureaucrats seeking illicit payments to provide routine services or process paperwork and forms.

"I was asked to pay a bribe to get a birth certificate for my daughter," someone in Bangalore, India, wrote in to the Web site on Feb. 29, recording payment of a 120-rupee bribe in Bangalore. "The guy in charge called it 'fees' " — except there are no fees charged for birth certificates, Ms. Ramanathan said.

Now, similar sites are spreading like kudzu around the globe, vexing petty bureaucrats the world over. Ms. Ramanathan said nongovernmental organizations and government agencies from at least 17 countries had contacted Janaagraha, the nonprofit organization in Bangalore that operates I Paid a Bribe, to ask about obtaining the source code and setting up a site of their own.

Last year, the Kingdom of Bhutan's Anti-Corruption Commission created an online form to allow the anonymous reporting of corruption, and a similar site was created in Pakistan, ipaidbribe, which estimates that the country's economy has lost some 8.5 trillion rupees, or about $94 billion, over the last four years to corruption, tax evasion and weak governance.

"We're working to create a coalition of I Paid a Bribe groups that would perhaps meet annually and share experiences," Ms. Ramanathan said.

Ben Elers, program director for Transparency International, a nongovernmental organization, said social media had given the average person powerful new tools to fight endemic corruption. "In the past, we tended to view corruption as this huge, monolithic problem that ordinary people couldn't do anything about," Mr. Elers said. "Now, people have new tools to identify it and demand change."

Since no names are given on the sites, in part to avoid potential issues of libel and defamation, it is impossible to verify the reports, but Mr. Elers and others experienced in exposing corruption say many of them ring true.

They are threatening enough that when a rash of similar sites popped up in China last summer, the government stamped them out within a couple of weeks, contending they had failed to register with the authorities.

They are, however, only a reporting mechanism. "In their own right, they don't change anything," Mr. Elers said. "The critical thing is that mechanisms are developed to turn this online activity into offline change in the real world."

Antony Ragui is hoping that happens in Kenya, where he started an ipaidabribe site in December. The site has gotten about thousands of hits since then and recorded about 470 bribery reports. The bribes are as varied as payments to make traffic infractions vanish from records and payments for admission to schools and for passports and identification documents.

"What if that person who paid a bribe to get a driver's license because he failed his driving test hits your sister or your child?" Mr. Ragui said. "We have a huge issue of Somalis paying bribes to get passports and personal identity cards to come to Kenya — what if one of them is a terrorist who blows something up? The bribes may be small but the consequences may be big for you and me."

His big concern at the moment is how to pay for the site. Unlike the Indian site, which has received money from the Omidyar Network and is housed within a well-financed nonprofit, the Kenyan I Paid a Bribe thus far is supported by Mr. Ragui himself.

Stephen King, the partner who oversees the technology for government transparency and accountability at the Omidyar Network, the organization that manages the philanthropy of the eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, said sustainability was an issue for many such groups.

The Omidyar Network supported Janaagraha to develop I Paid a Bribe, but the Web site will have to find a way to sustain itself. "A couple of the organizations we're working with in the area of transparency and accountability have been looking at things like microdonations, asking for a nominal amount to help cover their costs like a Wikipedia model," Mr. King said. "There's also some potential for carrying advertising on the sites."

Another idea, he said, was for such organizations to customize their platforms for other groups for a fee.

Mr. Ragui in Kenya is working to develop a system to enable reporting of bribery by mobile phone that he hopes to have ready in time for elections later this year. The idea is to allow people to report vote-buying in real

time that will be connected to a map. "It could be really powerful to have real time, granular data to analyze how much corruption affect the election," he said.

"My real goal, though," he added, "is to change just one government department and how it does business."

That is what happened in Bangalore, where Bhaskar Rao, the transport commissioner for the state of Karnataka, used the data collected on I Paid a Bribe to push through reforms in the motor vehicle department. Some 20 senior officers in the department were "cautioned," Mr. Rao said, and many others received ethics counseling.

Licenses are now applied for online — and last year, Bangalore became home to the world's first automated driving test tracks. Drivers navigate a figure eight, demonstrate their ability to parallel park, put their car in reverse and perform other tasks over a test of about nine minutes that is monitored by electronic sensors.

"It totally eliminated the whims and fancies of the motor vehicle inspectors," Mr. Rao, now inspector general of police for internal security, said in a telephone interview. "It is videotaped so everyone can see the results and everything is very transparent."

He said he could not have made the changes without I Paid a Bribe. "It was my unofficial spokesman to drive home the message that the public was really upset about this corruption," Mr. Rao said. "It helped me get my colleagues to fall in line, and it helped me persuade my superiors that we needed to do this."

Such concrete evidence of impact is nice, but Mr. King said the sites also were likely to have a deterrent effect that was difficult to measure. "As the information because more public over time and awareness of such reporting grows," he said, "I suspect those who might have been tempted to engage in this type of corruption are less likely to because the risk of being caught is much greater."

David Barboza contributed reporting.