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Alternative strategies to improve public sector integrity in contexts characterised by systemic corruption

Miloš Resimić

Reviewed by

Jamie Bergin (TI)

David Jackson (U4)

Contexts characterised by systemic corruption require alternative strategies to anti-corruption programming to effectively enhance public sector integrity. Traditional anti-corruption interventions rooted in the principal-agent model — such as strengthening monitoring systems and promoting transparency — are unlikely to succeed on their own but can be more effective when complemented by alternative strategies that are sensitive to local contexts and realities. These strategies include social norms interventions, social empowerment, reducing vulnerabilities to corruption, horizontal enforcement and top-down leadership changes.

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tihelpdesk@transparency.org

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Query

Please provide an overview of the emerging lessons on improving public sector integrity in contexts characterised by systemic corruption.

Main points

- Contexts of systemic corruption are typically characterised by the existence of high levels of corruption, deeply embedded informal networks and the prevalence of corruption-sustaining norms.
- Traditional anti-corruption interventions grounded in principal-agent model may not succeed in improving public sector integrity in such contexts for a number of reasons, including a lack of commitment on the part of principals to enforce anti-corruption reforms and the presence of embedded corruption-sustaining norms.
- Complementing traditional anti-corruption interventions with alternative strategies that are sensitive to local contexts and realities and responsive to collective action problems is a more promising approach.
- The alternative strategies that have been most influential in the literature can be grouped under five broad categories: social norms, social empowerment, reducing vulnerabilities to corruption, horizontal enforcement and top-down leadership changes.
- Understanding the underlying corruption-sustaining social norms in a specific context can help in designing more effective anti-corruption interventions that respond to rather than clash with these norms.
- Social empowerment – through strategies such as establishing 'pockets of effectiveness' and implementing capacity-building programmes – can help dismantle deeply embedded informal networks.
- To reduce vulnerabilities to corruption, it is important to recognise that corruption can play a functional role when formal institutions are dysfunctional. Addressing underlying institutional inefficiencies can help rebuild trust in formal institutions.
- The horizontal enforcement of anti-corruption programming is more likely to succeed if efforts are made to understand the political realities of specific local contexts, identify key leaders, assess their incentives and pinpoint potential coalitions that are most likely to be interested and incentivised to push for enforcement of anti-corruption reforms.
- Ethical leadership tackles systemic corruption by promoting integrity and accountability within public institutions, with leaders serving as role models who set ethical standards for their peers and subordinates.
- These alternative strategies are relatively new and, while empirical research testing of their assumptions is still nascent, some studies have emerged that show promising findings.

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Systemic corruption

Systemic corruption is a term often employed within the anti-corruption field, but without a single definition. Herath et al. (2019) describe systemic corruption as contexts where corruption is 'endemic, pervasive and embedded in the very fabric in social life'. Jackson et al. (2019: 1) argue that systemic corruption exists 'when a corrupt act recurs consistently and is connected to other corrupt acts through an underlying system that enables and encourages the corruption'. Johnston (1998: 86) argues that systemic corruption is 'not only more extensive but is also a qualitatively different problem, embedded in political and economic systems'.

Broadly speaking, the literature on systemic corruption emphasises key characteristics such as the existence of high levels of corruption, deeply embedded informal networks and the prevalence of corruption-sustaining norms (Chayes 2016; Herath et al. 2019; Chiao 2021; Baez Camargo et al. 2021; Gofen et al. 2022).

In contexts characterised by systemic corruption, empirical studies (Marquette and Peiffer 2018; Johnsøn et al. 2012) indicate that addressing corruption solely through traditional and individual-level anti-corruption interventions, such as improving monitoring systems and promoting transparency, may not yield positive results. Instead, there is a need to consider alternative strategies that are sensitive to the specific context, the norms that are prevalent there and the role of informal networks that sustain corruption (Jackson and Köbis 2018; Jackson 2022). This Helpdesk Answer explores these alternative approaches to anti-corruption programming aimed at improving public sector integrity in contexts characterised by systemic corruption.

Limitations of traditional approaches in enhancing public sector integrity in contexts with systemic corruption: A way forward

Anti-corruption programming has been predominantly influenced by the principal-agent framework. According to this framework, corruption happens when public officials have discretion over the provision of public services and lack accountability (Marquette and Peiffer 2018). These models explain individual instances of corruption by emphasising that decisions are made based on rational choice (Marquette and Peiffer 2018). Consequently, the expectation is that corruption can be addressed through policies that alter the rational choice calculations of individuals (Marquette and Peiffer 2018).

The principal-agent model broadly assumes that modifying incentives, discretion and the degree to which principals are able to monitor and sanction their agents can reduce corruption (Marquette and Peiffer 2018: 3). Consequently, anti-corruption interventions have typically focused on reducing the discretion of public officials, increasing monitoring mechanisms, promoting transparency in government and strengthening sanctions on those who engage in corruption, among other reform efforts (Marquette and Peiffer 2018: 3).

Such anti-corruption interventions also largely correspond with the individual-level measures that are employed with the goal of enhancing public sector integrity[1] and are also typically focused on influencing the behaviour of public officials through a combination of incentives, monitoring and structural reforms (Gans-Morse et al. 2018; Jenkins 2022). Common approaches include:

- rewards and penalties: implementing wage increases, offering performance-based incentives and fostering intrinsic motivations while enforcing penalties for misconduct

[1] Public integrity can be defined as 'the consistent alignment of, and adherence to, shared ethical values, principles and norms for upholding and prioritising the public interest over private interests in the public sector' (OECD 2017).

- monitoring: using audits and transparency initiatives
- restructuring bureaucracies: reducing bureaucratic discretion, introducing staff rotation, establishing whistleblowing mechanisms and simplifying procedures to limit opportunities for corruption
- screening and recruiting: promoting meritocratic recruitment processes
- anti-corruption agencies: establishing independent bodies tasked with preventing, investigating and prosecuting corruption
- educational campaigns: raising awareness about the harms of corruption and promoting ethical behaviour through public education initiatives (Gans-Morse et al. 2018; Huberts 1998; Avis et al. 2016; Jenkins 2022; Mugellini et al. 2021; Resimić 2022, 2023).

However, anti-corruption interventions grounded in the principal-agent framework may have had limited effects, especially in contexts characterised by systemic corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi 2006; Persson et al. 2013). The principal-agent approach has faced significant criticism from scholars who argue that its assumptions are not fully applicable in such settings (Persson et al. 2013; Marquette et al. 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi 2011, 2015; Rothstein and Teorell 2015; Rothstein and Varriach 2017). These critics argue that the principal-agent theory incorrectly assumes the existence of principals who would be committed to enforcing anti-corruption reforms, when, in fact, such commitment is often lacking in highly corrupt environments (Persson et al. 2013). Consequently, traditional anti-corruption interventions, such as monitoring and sanction regimes, tend to be ineffective because there are few, if any, actors motivated to enforce them (Persson et al. 2013)

Relying solely on traditional anti-corruption interventions in contexts of systemic corruption is problematic for several reasons. First, these reforms are grounded in a specific understanding of how states function, an understanding based on the experiences of Western-style states and organisations, assuming the widespread presence of a 'bureaucratic ethos', which is not the case in contexts characterised by widespread corruption (McDonnell 2020).

Second, anti-corruption strategies grounded in the principal-agent framework often overlook the significance of informal networks that engage in and sustain corruption. Informal networks in these contexts fill the space of missing institutions or exploit legal ambiguities, and their social embeddedness requires alternative strategies to address deeply embedded corruption (Jackson et al. 2019; Schoenman 2014). In such

environments, rule-following behaviour[2] may be the exception rather than the norm. As a result, anti-corruption strategies that neglect the fact that powerful political actors operate within deeply entrenched networks allowing them to violate rules with impunity, are unlikely to change their behaviour (Khan et al. 2019).

Third, these contexts create a collective action problem where actors are disincentivised from acting against corruption, even if they personally disapprove of it (Persson et al. 2013; Marquette and Peiffer 2018). The implication is that even 'honest principals' would have little incentives to avoid engaging in corruption, in contexts were corruption is perceived as widespread (Persson et al. 2013; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Marquette and Peiffer 2018). Viewing corruption in this way highlights its collective nature and puts the focus on a difficult challenge of addressing high levels of distrust in society and the corruption-sustaining norms (Marquette and Peiffer 2018). Olson's theory of collective action stresses that, despite shared objectives, group members will often refrain from collective action although that would be in the group's best interest. Instead, at least some members will 'free-ride' on others' efforts (i.e. will decide not to refrain from corruption but still aim to reap the benefits of reforms) (see Olson 1965; Hawkins 2022).

Fourth, the literature also suggests that sensitivity to local contexts is important, and that local conditions need to be assessed prior to devising anti-corruption interventions. For instance, identifying influential local leaders who have specific knowledge and networks that can mobilise support and inspire change can be useful when devising anti-corruption interventions (Jackson and Amundsen 2022). Mungiu-Pippidi and Dadašov (2017) found that contextual factors play a significant role in influencing the effectiveness of certain anti-corruption interventions. They argue that in the absence of the rule of law, the legal toolbox of anti-corruption is unlikely to work; for example, anti-corruption agencies can be used for selective targeting of political opponents (Mungiu-Pippidi and Dadašov 2017).

Finally, Marquette and Peiffer (2018) argue that existing approaches to anti-corruption programming neglect to consider that corruption sometimes serves a function, for example, when formal institutions (e.g. public services) are ineffective or dysfunctional. Therefore, it is critical to understand and address the underlying shortcomings of formal institutions to provide viable alternatives to entrenched problem-solving corruption networks (see Kubbe et al. 2024).

However, this does not mean that traditional anti-corruption interventions, based on the principal-agent framework, should be overlooked. Indeed, evidence indicates that

[2] For Khan et al. (2019), the rule-following behaviour refers to contexts in which there is an enforcement of a general rule of law, such as strong property rights protection.

the effectiveness of some alternative measures may be limited if carried out in isolation from robust enforcement mechanisms (Jenkins 2022).

Instead, many scholars advocate for a combined approach. For example, Marquette and Peiffer argue (2018) that alternative approaches can complement broader reforms that frame corruption as a collective action problem, while Jackson and Köbis (2018) argue targeting social norms can help in making traditional anti-corruption interventions more effective.

Alternative strategies: enhancing public sector integrity in contexts characterised by systemic corruption

Having addressed the limitations of anti-corruption interventions based on the principle-agent framework, this section explores five alternative strategies that recognise the collective nature of corruption and the specific dynamics of contexts characterised by systemic corruption. These strategies can complement the traditional anti-corruption programming, enhancing its effectiveness. They include:

- social norm-based approaches
- social empowerment
- addressing the functional role of corruption
- horizontal enforcement
- top-down leadership changes

This section closes with a short discussion on whether a 'big bang' or incremental approach works best to deliver such strategies and improve public sector integrity.

Social norm-based approaches

As a collective behaviour, corruption is often sustained by social norms, particularly in contexts characterised by widespread corruption (Jackson and Köbis 2018). Social norms can be defined as the mutual expectations held by members of a group regarding appropriate behaviour in specific situations (Scharbatke-Church and Chigas 2019; Mackie et al. 2015; Bicchieri 2017). These norms can affect the extent to which individuals engage in corruption and extent to which they expect others to do the same (Kubbe et al. 2024). Social norms can incentivise individuals' corrupt behaviour and facilitate corruption (Kubbe and Engelbert 2018; Baez Camargo et al. 2019).

As Mullard (2020) emphasises, there is no single norm of corruption but instead certain norms may in specific contexts promote corruption. For example, families in Tanzania invest in their children's education in medical schools, expecting that once they become a practicing doctor, they will support the family. As the salaries in the public health sector are low, these individuals are incentivised to engage in using public office to extract rents, through practices such as bribery, to honour their family obligations (Kubbe et al. 2024).

There are two types of social norms that may play a role in promoting corrupt behaviour:

- descriptive norms refer to a perceived frequency of corrupt behaviour within a social environment
- injunctive norms refer to perceived acceptability of corrupt behaviour as an appropriate behaviour within a social context (see e.g. Köbis et al. 2019; Mullard 2020).

Recognising these kinds of norms can support the design of more effective anti-corruption interventions. For example, Jackson and Köbis (2018) suggest identifying social normative pressures[3] that sustain corruption in a specific context and tailoring anti-corruption reforms accordingly. They emphasise that interventions which are locally grounded and locally led have greater chances in succeeding and avoiding unintended consequences (Jackson and Köbis 2018). Specifically, they suggest that standard anti-corruption strategies – such as changes in formal rules (e.g. anti-corruption legislation) monitoring and enforcement strategies (e.g. anti-corruption watchdogs, judiciary and audit), and transparency and accountability measures – should be complemented by social norms strategies aimed at alleviating social pressures that perpetuate corrupt behaviour.

Jackson and Köbis (2018) suggest a number of methods that could be used to address each different type of corruption-sustaining pressure. For instance, to counteract kinship norms that pressure individuals into corrupt acts, they recommend leveraging trendsetters: influential individuals who can inspire broader social change. These targeted interventions focus on empowering such individuals, who can be most effectively identified through social network analysis methods (Jackson and Köbis 2018: 36-37).

Köbis et al. (2019) emphasise that, for traditional anti-corruption approaches to succeed, the critical role that social norms play in shaping corrupt behaviour should be acknowledged (Köbis et al. 2019). If not, traditional measures may have only limited

[3] They distinguish between social normative pressures stemming from society (sociability and kinship pressures) and those from within organisations (vertical and horizontal) (Jackson and Köbis 2018: 6).

effects as seen in cases like public salary increase programmes that fail to reduce corruption on their own (Soraperra et al. 2019; Köbis et al. 2019). Conversely, the impact of nudging interventions, such as integrity messaging, is also likely to be limited in high-corruption settings unless they address the underlying material drivers of corruption (i.e. low salaries) (see Falisse and Leszczynska 2022; Jenkins 2022).

Similarly, several studies highlight the negative effects of excluding consideration of social norms from anti-corruption programming, which may result in even exacerbating corruption, particularly in fragile contexts (see Scharbatke-Church and Chigas 2019; Hoffmann and Patel 2017). Specifically, measures aimed at increasing oversight and capacity building within the Ugandan criminal justice system helped build capacity and put accountability mechanisms in place (Scharbatke-Church and Chigas 2019: 21). However, these reforms were not effective in reducing the overall scale of corruption, and Scharbatke-Church and Chigas (2019: 22) found that social norms were the main explanation for undermining these reform efforts. Namely, police and judicial officials faced peer pressure to conform to corruption-sustaining social norms and suffered consequences when they went against such norms, such as transfers to remote posts (Scharbatke-Church and Chigas 2019: 22).

A report by Scharbatke-Church et al. (2020) was commissioned on the challenges in implementing Section 46 of Uganda's 2009 Anti-Corruption Act, which mandates the dismissal of public officials convicted of corruption from pension and payroll. It highlights that mapping, understanding and addressing underlying social norms that contribute to resisting such anti-corruption provisions is critical. The report emphasises that, while addressing institutional factors is important for ensuring smoother implementation of the law, it is necessary to tackle social norms to alleviate the social pressures[4] that help sustain corrupt behaviour. To this end, the report suggests: i) weakening vertical pressure by limiting the power of senior officials to impose professional sanctions that reinforce corruption-sustaining social norms; and ii) empowering trendsetters, individuals whose behaviour deviates from corruption-sustaining social norms, among other strategies (Scharbatke-Church et al. 2020: 28-30).

Baez Camargo's (2022) study on Tanzania explores ways to target social norms to promote anti-corruption outcomes and leverage social networks to implement anti-corruption interventions aimed at tackling bribery in public health facilities. Her approach consisted of: i) recruiting anti-corruption champions among health workers who would then disseminate messages against receiving gifts through their social networks; and ii) using environmental cues by placing posters for patients stating

[4] The study identified two main types of corruption-sustaining social pressures: vertical, exemplified in following a superior's orders without regards for the rules, and horizontal, referring to pressure of avoiding contributing to administrative sanctioning processes (Scharbatke-Church et al. 2020: 28).

that health workers do not accept bribes, alongside messages aimed at health service providers appealing to their professional ethics (Baez Camargo 2022: 6). The study adopted a network approach, based on existing evidence that corruption facilitating social norms are often enforced through informal networks and the evidence that social networks play a fundamental role in shaping behaviours (e.g. Baez Camargo 2017; Baez Camargo et al. 2021; Schoenman 2014; Resimić 2021). Therefore, building alternative networks can be an essential resource in ensuring that positive role models can count on support of others in countering corruption (Baez Camargo 2022: 22). Post-intervention interviews provided some evidence that the messaging had a deterrent effect, with some respondents reporting that they conveyed a sense of feeling monitored (Baez Camargo 2022: 23).

A growing body of literature suggests the potential of social norms-nudging campaigns to motivate collective action against corruption (Köbis et al. 2015; Köbis et al. 2019; Meyer-Sahling et al. 2019; Erlich and Gans-Morse 2025). For example, Köbis et al. (2019) found that descriptive norms-messages on posters can help reduce bribery, but they also noted that social norm nudges[5] alone are not sufficient to curb deeply embedded corruption. Instead, these nudges should serve as a complement to traditional anti-corruption policies.

Social empowerment

Social empowerment is another potential strategy for curbing corruption, particularly in contexts where corruption is widespread. It can help disrupt deeply embedded underlying power networks that contribute to the persistence of systemic corruption. In contexts where corruption is systemic, Johnston (1998) emphasised the importance of social empowerment, by which he meant expanding the range of political and economic resources and alternatives available to ordinary citizens. While he acknowledged that institutional reforms, advancing transparency and accountability, are indispensable, Johnston (1998) considered social empowerment necessary.

Subsequent studies have sought to operationalise the concept of social empowerment (for an overview, see: Jackson 2022). For example, Jackson (2022) proposed a strategy of social empowerment through collective action and reducing vulnerabilities to corruption. He suggested that collective action, whether among administrators, managers, community groups, businesses or political actors can serve as a tool for

[5] Köbis et al. define social norm nudges as 'a nudge whose mechanism of action relies on social norms, i.e., on providing social information or eliciting social expectations with the intent of inducing desirable behaviour'.

empowerment and systemic change, helping to establish accountability mechanisms and sustain active resistance to corruption (Jackson 2022: 16; DLP 2018). Similarly, Khan et al. (2019) suggest that incentive driven collective action can have long-term effects in sustaining anti-corruption mobilisation. They propose redirecting the focus of anti-corruption interventions to the sectoral-level challenges that can activate self-interest motivations among relatively powerful groups to push for the enforcement of rules (Khan et al. 2019).

A broad body of scholarship on 'clusters of excellence' or 'pockets of effectiveness' (Geddes 1990; Leonard 2010; Roll 2011, 2014; Willis 2014; Johnson 2015; McDonnell 2017, 2020; Hickey 2023) emphasises the role of high-integrity clusters within organisations that can serve as seeds of anti-corruption excellence that may then spread to other parts of the system and ensure long-term solutions to uphold public sector integrity. Such pockets of effectiveness can exist even in weak states plagued with rampant corruption, though establishing them is a significant challenge (van Eeden Jones and Lasthuizen 2018).

For instance, McDonnell's (2020) study of Ghana examines the emergence of a bureaucratic ethos within specific parts of the public administration and explains how these clusters of excellence emerged. These bureaucratic niches were sufficiently insulated from neo-patrimonial political influence and were led by cadres with what McDonnell describes as 'dual habitus': individuals who had experience in both the local environment and functionally bureaucratised contexts elsewhere (McDonnell 2020: 204). These cadres, who had discretion over personnel decisions, used their position to expand the cluster of excellence by recruiting staff who demonstrated an affinity for the bureaucratic ethos. Over time, this process resulted in the formation of a distinct subculture of bureaucracy, which stood in sharp contrast to the broader neo-patrimonial environment that characterised much of Ghana's public administration (McDonnell 2020).

Social empowerment can also be accomplished through capacity building in the public sector to address systemic forms of corruption. For example, Jackson et al. (2019) suggest that capacity-building programmes for parliamentarians in Jordan could focus on supporting them leverage their leadership positions within social networks to build a coalition of parliamentarians and establish normative constraints to oppose the most harmful forms of *wasta*.[6] For example, one reason for the persistence of *wasta* is its role in enabling powerful political actors to maintain their hold on power by fulfilling constituents' demands for favours. A potential strategy to counter this would involve establishing alternative coalitions horizontally and close to

[6] *Wasta* is concept in Jordan that means in simple terms 'using connections to get things done'. It is a practice channelled through social networks and sustained by social norms (Jackson et al. 2019; see also: Al-Hiari 2022).

the centre of power, which could gradually challenge this entrenched practice (Jackson et al. 2019: 22).

Citizens can also be empowered to monitor and hold public sector officials accountable through technology and data, especially in the management and allocation of public funds, an area highly vulnerable to corruption. Data transparency, achieved through publicly available, interactive, machine-readable and regularly updated data on budgets, public procurement and other aspects of public funding, enables citizens to monitor public expenditures and voice their concerns. For instance, the Transparency Portal in Brazil, launched by the office of the comptroller general in 2004, provides comprehensive information on budgets, procurement processes, contracts, suppliers and spending (Governance Matters Magazine 2023). The portal has around 1.4 million users every month (Governance Matters Magazine 2023).

Furthermore, citizens can support public officials who demonstrate a strong bureaucratic ethos. An example of this is the Integrity Icon media campaign run by citizens in Uganda naming accountable public officials to highlight positive role models (UK Aid 2020: 31). These initiatives can complement traditional anti-corruption programming by providing a protective network for ethical officials, helping shield them from pressure or intimidation within their organisations (UK Aid 2020: 31).

Addressing the functional role of corruption

When it comes to reducing vulnerabilities to corruption, one consideration to keep in mind is that corruption may serve a functional role in contexts characterised by systemic corruption. As Marquette and Peiffer (2018) argue, framing corruption solely as a problem, whether through principal-agent or collective action models, creates a blind spot. These frameworks often fail to recognise that in systemic corruption contexts, corrupt practices can sometimes provide practical solutions to everyday problems (Marquette and Peiffer 2018).

For example, when the civil service is ill-equipped and underfunded, corruption may become a means for citizens to navigate dysfunctional systems. Jackson (2022) illustrates this with the case of bribery involving tax officials in the absence of a functional system of tax rules. Without clear regulations, businesses and bureaucrats may find it mutually beneficial to engage in corrupt exchanges, leading to an embedded system of corruption that co-opts other actors (Jackson 2022:18). To reduce vulnerabilities to such corrupt behaviour, digitalisation of tax administration can be an effective solution in addressing tax-related bribery. A successful example of this is seen in the Dominican Republic where the tax agency standardised its

procedures and built a reputation for being non-corruptible by eliminating the use of informal means of settlements (Lozano 2012; for an overview of similar studies see: van Eeden Jones and Lasthuizen 2018).

The practice of *wasta* in Jordan, discussed in the previous section, also serves a functional role in the absence of effective formal public institutions (Jackson et al 2019). Jackson et al. (2019) argue that, to reduce vulnerabilities to such forms of corruption, it is essential to make formal institutions more reliable and effective than *wasta*. They highlight one approach where parliamentarians could focus on building efficient and responsive public institutions, going beyond merely establishing rules and procedures. This can include developing programmatic agendas centred on public service delivery (Jackson et al. 2019).

In another example, Boamah and Williams (2019) argue that people in Kenya may resort to power theft, bribery and other illegal activities in settings where electricity provision tends to be expensive and unreliable, and the infrastructure is deteriorating under routine bureaucratic neglect. They argue that proactive measures such as educating the public, removing bureaucratic bottlenecks and speeding up grid application processes, could discourage such forms of corruption (Boamah and Williams 2019: 8).

Horizontal enforcement

Anti-corruption reforms often face resistance in contexts characterised by systemic corruption, even when these reforms are targeted at specific sectors, deemed politically viable (Jackson and Amundsen 2022: 12). Therefore, some scholars argue for the importance of understanding political realities of specific sectors, as this can reveal opportunities to mobilise actors who are willing to support reform efforts. Such an understanding can also help to identify key factors for successful reforms, including the ability to influence others to support change and the capacity to expand networks that back anti-corruption initiatives (Jackson and Amundsen 2022: 12; Khan et al. 2019).

For instance, Khan et al. (2019) emphasise the role of coalitions in promoting the horizontal enforcement of reforms by identifying sectoral anti-corruption interventions that would sequentially target corruption in sectors where these measures are feasible and have a high impact (Khan et al. 2019: 18). The expectation is that these targeted strategies would help in improving developmental outcomes and consequently broaden the support for rule enforcement, opening the space for more comprehensive anti-corruption reforms (Khan et al. 2019: 18). They point out that external enforcement capabilities tend to be weak in developing countries, especially when they face powerful actors (Khan et al. 2019: 36). However, certain

rule-violations may harm equally powerful actors, who can be mobilised to help in the enforcement of rules that are socially desirable, and Khan et al. (2019: 36) suggest that these opportunities could be a good place to start. For example, when looking at the smuggling of sugar and rice in Tanzania, Khan et al. (2019) identified several context specific causes of corruption, such as political financing of elections and the political management of food scarcity and trade bans. They highlight a coalition of four main sugar producers who managed to lobby the government against traders and smugglers, securing exclusive import licences in 2017 (Khan et al. 2019: 39). Nevertheless, this success did not last as the new import licencing scheme did not lead to more domestic production, resulting in producers selling back their import licence to the traders (Khan et al. 2019: 39).

Understanding the local context, identifying key actors and finding leaders who can inspire change and horizontal enforcement is important. Local, influential actors, have specific knowledge and networks that can be leveraged to mobilise support for anti-corruption reforms (Jackson and Amundsen 2022). For example, Booth and Unsworth (2014) suggest that donor interventions should prioritise local leadership when developing solutions tailored to specific contextual challenges. In this process, it is also important to identify actors who stand to benefit most from reforms, who may not always be political figures. For example, Uberti (2020) suggests that students could be mobilised to counter corruption in the education sector in Albania. Uberti (2020) states that practitioners could think of ways to mobilise the student movement in supporting anti-corruption tools within the education sector, such as a pay-for-performance system, a reform of academic promotions, use of external monitoring when allocating research funds and other measures.

Other studies also emphasise the importance of local actors in promoting horizontal enforcement. For example, McDonnell's (2020: 206) study on the emergence of a bureaucratic ethos within public administration in Ghana found that effective clusters within the sector emerged when leaders delegated sufficient authority to the founding cadres, resulting in these clusters developing bonds of reciprocity in the institution-building process. Over time, this led to a creation of a distinct subculture of bureaucracy, whose members shared a sense of distinctiveness from the external environment which was operating based on neo-patrimonial rules. This sense of distinctiveness fostered group identification and necessitated efforts to protect the bureaucratic niche, which was accomplished through remaking internal practices and engaging in more ambitious efforts to remake the external environment (McDonnell 2020: 205). McDonnell's (2020) study challenges conventional approaches that advocate for abstract monitoring systems and strategies focused on limiting discretion. Instead, her study suggests that intrinsic motivation among public officials is more effectively encouraged when there are clear opportunities for growth. This motivation can be nurtured by fostering bonds of learning and emulation within small clusters. When a small group of officials has the authority to make meaningful

decisions about how an institution is organised, they become more invested in its success and more committed to defending it (McDonnell 2020: 206).

Top-down leadership change

Changing the behaviour of leaders is also recognised in the literature as one strategy for improving public integrity in contexts characterised by systemic corruption. For example, van Eeden Jones and Lasthuizen (2018) found that ethical leadership[7] plays a crucial role in building public sector integrity in Indonesia, offering insights into a setting with widespread corruption. Focusing on a large, state-owned electricity company, their study examined how ethical leadership contributed to the development of an organisational integrity policy programme. Their analysis suggested that ethical leadership should be established at multiple levels, both within and outside of an organisation for organisational integrity programmes to be effective (van Eeden Jones and Lasthuizen 2018: 181). They emphasised the importance of layered alignments of ethical leadership in contexts with widespread corruption. First, support from political leaders is essential to facilitate public sector organisational integrity, and ensure that 'pockets of effectiveness' not only survive but potentially diffuse to other parts of the system. Second, the organisation itself should have a strong and autonomous top executive leadership, free to develop integrity programmes. Finally, van Eeden Jones and Lasthuizen (2018: 183) argue that an organisation should have executive managers who lead by example to ensure integrity in the work of an organisation.

Other empirical research found support for theoretical expectations that ethical leadership plays an important role for the integrity of public administration. For instance, a study on corruption in the health sector in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda found that leaders can serve as role models for diffusing ethical behaviour within an organisation (Camargo et al. 2020). Some other studies suggest that ethical leadership plays an important role for the integrity of public administration (see Jenkins 2022). For instance, a study of Israeli regional council employees found that greater standards of ethical leadership were positively associated with employees' awareness of the code of ethics (Beeri et al. 2013). Conversely, studies also found that negative examples (e.g. when leaders openly bypass rules and procedures) can lead to dysfunctional integrity frameworks as junior staff learn from the unethical behaviour of leaders and emulate it (Hanna et al. 2013).

[7] By ethical leadership, they consider 'the leader's ability to cultivate ethical conduct among followers by setting a good example; two-way communication about ethics and reinforcement of integrity through discipline and rewards' (cf., Brown et al. 2005; van Eeden Jones and Lasthuizen 2018: 176).

Big bang versus incremental approach

Each of these alternative strategies can also be placed within the academic debate over whether a 'big bang' or incremental approach works best to improve public sector integrity. The big bang approach to anti-corruption reform relates to the pace of reforms and is usually contrasted with incremental approaches. Despite some definitional differences about the meaning of the two concepts, the big bang approach typically refers to a sufficiently comprehensive and rapid institutional change designed to compel the broader society to alter its behaviour within a relatively short period of time (see Stephenson 2019).

The argument for a big bang approach to anti-corruption in contexts characterised by systemic corruption is grounded in the assumption that the payoff for engaging in corruption is higher in these environments compared to low-corruption settings as the former can get stuck in a high-corruption equilibrium, where individuals are incentivised to engage in corruption (Jackson 2020: 15; see also Rose-Ackerman 1999; Collier 2006; Rothstein 2011). To break this vicious cycle, proponents argue that a big bang approach is needed in contexts with systemic corruption (Jackson 2020; Collier 2006; Sparrow 2008; Rothstein 2011; Akerlof 2016; Fisman and Golden 2017; see also: Stephenson 2019).

According to this view, reforms must be extensive to achieve behavioural change in the public sector because public officials play a crucial role in signalling the 'rules of the game', and the public's perception of institutions can either reinforce or undermine anti-corruption efforts (Rothstein 2005; Jackson 2020). A notable example of such a rapid change was in Georgia after 2004 when comprehensive anti-corruption reforms included massive purges in the public sector, especially of police officers and civil servants, strict punishments for corruption offences and salary increases (Alam and Southworth 2012; Börzel and Pamuk 2012; Sundell 2016).

However, Stephenson (2019) cautions that, that even if corruption was self-reinforcing, this does not necessarily mean that a big bang approach is the most effective solution. Rather, he suggests that cumulative, incremental reforms hold more promise. As with the other strategies, the local context matters, and it should be taken into account before deciding on the pace and comprehensiveness of anti-corruption reforms (Stephenson 2019; Jackson 2020).

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U4 is part of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), an independent development research institute in Norway.

www.u4.no

u4@cmi.no

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