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Building anti-corruption resilience to combat entrenched corruption systems

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'The system cannot fight corruption because corruption is the system.'

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When corruption is part of a system in sectors like health or education, it poses a different challenge compared to more transactional corruption. Corruption systems are characterised by many actors, working through shared codes and rules, that serve broader political and economic purposes. They endanger sectoral institutions, welfare, and democratic life. Corruption systems also constrain, resist and circumvent conventional anti-corruption strategies, prompting an ever-present risk of implementation failure. To overcome these perils, this U4 Issue proposes a three-step approach to building resilience into anti-corruption action: more targeted efforts; more system-sensitive choices; and more emphasis on ‘social empowerment’.

Main points

- Much of the conventional anti-corruption approach has been shaped by the perspective that corruption is an ‘act’ – yet recent empirical work shows how many corrupt acts are nested within broader coordination structures.
- Understanding when corruption is part of a system, and when it is not, is important for anti-corruption policy design as each corruption problem needs a different approach and policy path.
- Corruption systems raise the stakes for anti-corruption because of the threat they pose to accountability mechanisms. This is because corruption systems tend to operate through a logic of co-optation–impunity–exploitation which can pose relentless harm to the broader institutional framework.
- Networks within corruption systems will always seek to defend the system. Such ‘systemic resistance’ will often nullify conventional anti-corruption approaches. This typical vulnerability can only be addressed by building more resilience into anti-corruption efforts.
- Building resilience into anti-corruption is about: enhancing efficiency through targeted approaches; making more informed design choices based on context and sensitivity to how systems operate; and allowing actors in sectors to challenge the power differences that sustain corruption systems.

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Renewed thinking to address corruption systems

Corruption hampers the delivery of essential medicines; restricts access to education; undermines security structures; and exacerbates the destruction of the environment. Despite significant resources dedicated to curbing corruption in sectors, long-run patterns confirm that corruption is often impervious to change, remaining a seemingly embedded constraint on the fair and efficient provision of public goods and services. This paper argues that the reason is partly because anti-corruption efforts in sectors assume that corrupt acts are separate and unconnected instances, rather than being part of a system.

Anti-corruption research has long recognised the systemic elements of corruption, helping to redefine the problem as something more embedded and far-reaching.¹ Thinking has also emerged about what this means for practice. Scharbatke-Church and Chigas,² for instance, call for a shift away from the idea that for corruption the ‘causes and solutions are well-known... [and that] “Best practice” and expertise can reliably and predictably “solve” the problem.’³

However, as gaps remain in the reasoning for how practitioners can address what we call ‘corruption systems’, this paper aims to build on important recent thinking to provide practical pathways for action. We focus on corruption systems in sectors, such as health, education, transport, environment, and local governance, because these are areas where systems can most directly affect social and economic outcomes, and where entry points for anti-corruption may be most feasible.⁴

We offer three contributions to the current research. Section 1 defines what ‘systems’ mean in the context of corruption. This perspective is important as the word ‘systemic’ is often used misleadingly to mean ‘a lot’ of corruption. Section 2 moves on to clarify the double-bind that these systems set for anti-corruption. Corruption systems capture accountability processes through a logic of co-option–impunity–exploitation that reduces the potential for anti-corruption enforcement. However, corruption systems also have the capacity for collective

1. Scott, 1972; Johnston, 1998; Scharbatke-Church, 2017.

2. 2016.

3. Scharbatke-Church and Chigas, 2016.

4. Pyman and Heywood, 2021; Khan, Andreoni and Roy, 2019.

action, meaning that, even when anti-corruption programmes can be mobilised, networks will organise to channel ‘systemic resistance’ to reforms.

Because of these constraints, Section 3 argues that anti-corruption is vulnerable to systemic resistance and can only be addressed by building more resilience into anti-corruption efforts. We propose that resilience is about: building efficiency into efforts through targeted approaches; making more informed and context-defined design choices based on sensitivity to how systems operate; and empowering actors in sectors to challenge the power differences that sustain corruption systems.

1. Recognising corruption systems

Much of the conventional anti-corruption approach has been shaped by the perspective that corruption is an ‘act’, a one-shot and opportunist ‘abuse of entrusted power for private gain’, perpetrated by independent wrongdoers for personal enrichment.⁵

The general analytical emphasis is often on ‘quantities’ of corruption in sectors: a growing collection of indexes measure how widespread corruption is, how often it occurs, and the monetary value of the ill-gotten gains.⁶ Accordingly, most corruption risk management approaches encourage the listing of potential individual acts of corruption to estimate their frequency.⁷ Most planning frameworks also assume a linear relationship between a particular anti-corruption tool and a reduction in corruption.⁸

In contrast to this ‘corrupt acts as one-offs’ perspective, recent empirical work shows how many corrupt acts are nested within broader coordination structures. For example, Baez Camargo et al.⁹ analyse how corruption in eastern Africa is often coordinated by informal social networks.¹⁰ Chayes¹¹ also explains how corruption is part of a system – for example, describing an intricate plan in the banking sector in Moldova, forged by a coalition of politicians and business

5. Scharbatke-Church and Chigas, 2016.

6. See for example: Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index 2021, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>.

7. Johnson, 2015.

8. For critiques of linear planning, please see Mason, 2021.

9. 2021.

10. Baez Camargo et al., 2021; Baker, 2020; Chayes, 2016; Scharbatke-Church and Chigas, 2016.

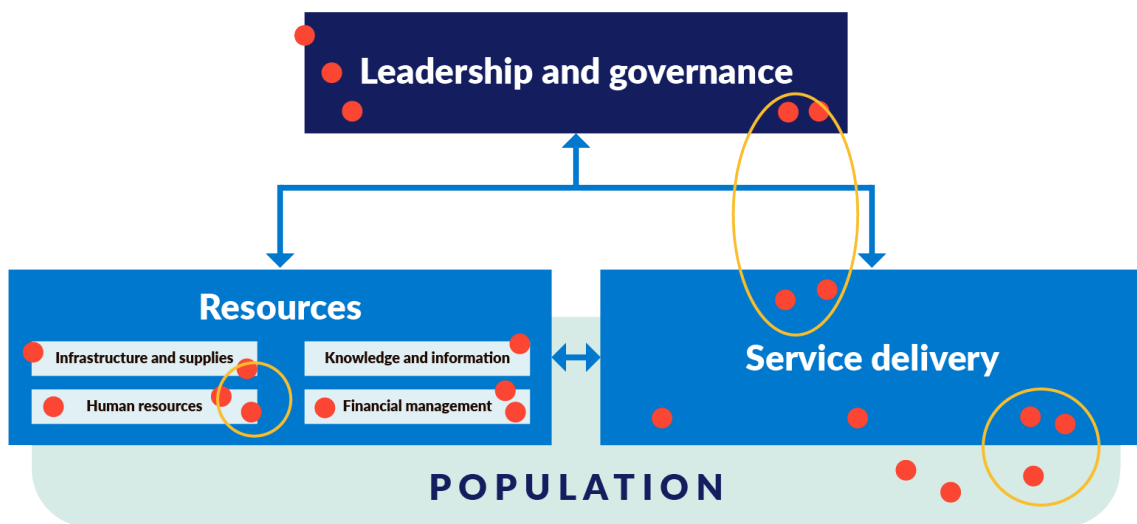
11. 2016.

elites and aided by foreign involvement, to subjugate public financial institutions.¹² Scharbatke-Church and Chigas¹³ demonstrate how a systems analysis can help understand the multiple causes of corruption in the criminal justice sector.¹⁴

Despite this important work, few current models can provide a versatile definition for corrupt acts that are part of a system. Understanding when corruption is part of a system, and when it is not, is important for anti-corruption policy design as each problem needs a different approach and policy path. Pursuing a more conventional anti-corruption approach for systems may be ineffective and result in unintended consequences; but pursuing a systems approach for transactional corruption may be inefficient and over-complicated.

We focus on the notion of ‘corruption systems’ rather than the oft-used ‘systemic corruption’ because the latter can reinforce stereotyped notions of ‘fantastically corrupt’ states in the developing world. Also, akin to related terms such as ‘endemic’ and ‘structural’ corruption or ‘neo-patrimonial’ regimes, such a broad characterisation of states can cast a fatalistic shadow over the possibilities for reform, implying that corruption is an insoluble problem. While corruption systems may criss-cross the broader mechanics of law-making, democracy and policy implementation, they do not define these processes.

Figure 1. Corruption in a health system



Source: van Olmen et al. 2010.

12. Chayes, 2016.

13. 2016.

14. Scharbatke-Church, 2017.

Figure 1 depicts the health sector, with corrupt acts marked with a red dot. These corrupt acts could be procurement fraud, bribery, embezzlement, and so on. The circles illustrate when those corrupt acts are clustered together by a system.

To understand how corruption can be part a 'system', we build on the definition proposed by Donella Meadows,¹⁵ one of the leading supporters of a systemic perspective for public policy problems. Meadows suggests:

A system isn't just any old collection of things. A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something. If you look at that definition closely for a minute, you can see that a system must consist of three kinds of things: elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose.¹⁶

When corruption is part of a system, it has:

1. As elements: *multiple actors*

Systems have multiple elements that perform different actions. Transactional forms of corruption require a minimum of individuals, but within corruption systems, acts are generally not perpetuated by a few, but by multiple actors. The range of actors can move beyond government to include the private sector, and criminal elements, and into those institutions that are responsible for dealing with corruption. The number of actors will vary according to the complexity and aims of the system, from a core cabal to broader networks.

For example, consider a patient who makes a complaint that a health worker has demanded a bribe from them to access medical care. From a transactional lens, the cause and effect of the act are clear: a health worker, acting out of a desire for private gain, misuses their authority to extract money from a patient, who ordinarily has a right to that treatment. Imagine that the health worker was not acting alone but was part of broader group involved in extorting patients. This 'coalition' could contain other health workers, but also doctors, senior management, and local politicians. While all these actors may not gain directly from that individual instance, the weight in numbers of the 'coalition' enables that corrupt act.

15. 2009.

16. Meadows, 2009.

2. As interconnections: *institutionalised practices*

Corruption systems have production costs.¹⁷ To lower transactions costs, systems will seek their own form of self-regulation to ensure that the systems operate to plan, to co-opt new members, or punish those who do not comply. Therefore, corruption systems are not assembled anew for every action but are interconnected, constantly reinforced by steady, informal game rules that define how corrupt actors interact.

These support systems need to run at an efficient, self-replicating level, while helping to avoid dangers, for example, by regulating against temptations of excessive greed that may attract unwanted public attention. These rules may be purely expedient. In other cases, they may be rooted in long-established expectations. Such informal operating systems exist within or alongside the formal rules and may also take their place. In contrast, transactional corruption may be more opportunist – such as an individual seizing an opportunity, and not behaving according to established or informal norms.

Returning to the healthcare example, imagine if patients and staff in the hospital established terms and conditions for bribery, and circumstances where bribes should be demanded are defined by convention. This act is coded in expectations about the behaviour of hospital staff and new employees are co-opted into the system, meaning the extortion is part of a stable pattern of repeat behaviour.

3. As a purpose: *political, economic or social functions*

Functions bind systems. Corruption is part of a system when broader purposes beyond individual private gain underpin the system. System functions can vary from the accomplishment of political or economic goals, like winning elections, securing an influence on policy, or improving the privileges of the ‘in group’. They can also function as an alternative to bureaucratic disorder or provide a way to fulfil certain social norms.

Corruption systems can be set up with a specific goal in mind. In the healthcare example, the bribery system may evolve by design through the actions of local politicians who use some of the ‘informal tax’ to help fund patronage networks and political campaigns. Sometimes corruption systems emerge due to

17. Fazekas, Sberna and Vannucci, 2021.

dysfunction, with the purpose of coping with scarcity, bureaucratic disorder, or general lack of capacity. For example, healthcare professionals may ask for extra payments to buy missing medical supplies that are not forthcoming within existing institutional arrangements. Senior management may tolerate this to encourage frontline workers to stay in their post, thus allowing it to become entrenched.¹⁸

The three essential elements of a corruption system

Corruption systems may exist across sectors and countries. Some corruption systems are transnational, meaning corrupt acts are sustained within a global system.¹⁹ Even so, the same definition applies different contexts: corruption is part of a system only when it is 1) perpetrated by networks that 2) act according to stable practices and norms, and that 3) serve political or social functions that emerge through design or dysfunction.²⁰

If the corrupt act is perpetrated by many actors but not underpinned by hidden rules that repeat behaviour and reproduce benefits, it is likely a one-off ‘scandal’ rather than a system – even if it serves a broader rationale. A case in point would be the Watergate scandal: an organised attempt to cover up the 1972 break-in at the United States Democratic National Committee headquarters which eventually led to 48 convictions and a presidential resignation.

If the corrupt act is organised but not connected to a broader purpose, then it is likely a corruption-enabled ‘scheme’ – even if it is partially institutionalised. An example would be schemes to siphon public funds to offshore bank accounts to serve elites – even if these elites change. Finally, if the corrupt act is at least partly institutionalised but not coordinated by multiple actors, it is likely just one-off transactions disconnected from each other, rather than a corruption system. An example would be a situation where it is common practice for parents to pay teachers a fee for giving students a good exam result. This would not be a corruption system unless the teachers are coordinating among themselves or with other stakeholders to create a situation where parents or students feel compelled to pay these fees, and the fees paid are shared within the system – such as from teacher to headteacher.

18. Maestad and Mwisongo, 2007.

19. Bullough (2022) describes how the UK has become the ‘centre of gravity’ for many of these systems, supplying the necessary architecture of lawyers, expertise to maintain the mechanics of illicit extraction and reinvestment.

20. I am grateful to former U4 colleague Cecilie Wathne for providing input into this definition.

These boundaries are not rigid or fixed in time. Transactional corruption could become a scheme if, for example, a new senior manager who is part of a broader network starts to demand a cut. The scheme can then become a system – for example, when a politically affiliated union extracts fees in return for broad protection, and these corruption gains are then used to fund electoral campaigns or buy off accountability institutions.

Table 1. Comparing corruption types by systemic elements

	Networks	Institutionalisation	Political or social functions
Transactional corruption	Absent	Possible	Absent
Corruption scandal	Possible	Absent	Absent
Corruption scheme	Present	Possible	Absent
Corruption system	Present	Present	Present

There can be sub-types of corruption systems. For example, the concept of ‘state capture’ basically describes a corruption system that emphasises the role of business elites (elements) in privatising public policy through an informal system of representation (interconnectedness) to secure unfair competitive advantage (broader function).²¹ Corruption systems in sectors can be connected to wider structures, such as forms of political organisation and norms, or overall institutional quality. These broader qualities are often called neo-patrimonialism or kleptocratic rule. Systems can also emerge relatively independently within sectors, regardless of what is happening within the wider political system.²² Widespread corruption and systems of corruption can be closely correlated, and corruption systems can exist within otherwise low-corruption countries.

It is difficult to accurately estimate the proportion of corruption that is part of a system. However, the following indicators can imply a high probability that corruption in a sector has systemic elements:

- Few convictions for corruption, when this low rate is inconsistent with perceptions and evidence of how widespread corruption is
- Consistently low levels of trust in institutions and government
- Mismatch between formal and informal rules and practice

21. Kaufmann, Jones and Hellman, 2000; David-Barrett, 2021.

22. Olivier de Sardan and Blundo, 2006; Anders, 2005.

- High allegations of corruption at elections when defenders of corruption systems may be most active
- Corruption levels that tend to remain in sectors, even when there is a change of government or leadership – sometimes, despite short-term progress, reformists eventually get kicked out or co-opted
- Continued under-performance (for example, failure to achieve performance targets) though this could be due to a combination of factors, including low capacity and corruption systems
- A general desensitisation to corruption

2. A double bind for anti-corruption practitioners

The distinct characteristics of corruption systems constrain conventional anti-corruption interventions in two main ways.

Cycles of co-option, impunity and exploitation hollow out accountability

Corruption systems raise the stakes for anti-corruption because of the threat they pose to accountability mechanisms. This is because corruption systems tend to operate through a logic of co-option–impunity–exploitation which can pose relentless harm to the broader institutional framework.²³

Systems seek strength through a greater number of participants. Corruption systems naturally co-opt people, either because they simply accept corruption as a norm; they are attracted by the potential benefits; coerced by social or political hierarchies; or because the absence of institutional alternatives makes them feel powerless to resist.

As co-option increases, so do the incentives to protect the people within the system from scrutiny and formal oversight. Active efforts are made to seek impunity. Those who may be trapped in the system have few reasons to report abuse. Accountability mechanisms may be hollowed out or captured, and progressive reforms deliberately resisted, which results in power flowing away from the democratic institutions to the few.

²³. Evans, 2022.

Impunity creates further scope for other forms of exploitation, abuse and anti-social behaviour. ‘Sextortion’, violence and intimidation, organised crime and discrimination are all associated with corruption systems. Sectors can be defined by negative forms of social capital, whereby anti-social forms of behaviour are sanctioned and encouraged, and outcomes tend to be inequitable, with the vulnerable suffering the most.

Daniel Czitrom²⁴ illustrates this dynamic through his description of the 19th-century New York Police Department (NYPD), where positions of authority were bought and sold in an open market. Regardless of who entered the force, prospective police captains allied themselves to powerful business figures, public officials and local patrons to raise enough cash to be able to buy the position of police captain for US\$15,000 (US\$400,000 today).²⁵ To pay back these investments, police help was privatised, afforded to the highest bidders only, including those within illicit trades. Those in the system worked hard to ensure impunity and so corruption became very difficult to stop: despite, the 1898 Lexow Committee investigation charging nearly half the police force with indictments on bribery, extortion and neglect of duty, not a single police officer was sent to prison, and all kept their jobs.²⁶ This well-honed system persisted to the extent that, by the end of the century, the NYPD had become essentially managers of the city’s vice economy, which supported associated exploitations of trafficking and violence.²⁷

The co-option–impunity–exploitation dynamic is mutually reinforcing. Exploitation creates further incentives to avoid scrutiny, which calls for more co-option in the system. As this happens, power accumulates within the system, further guarding against openness and transparency. Trust declines in the state, which makes it even harder to pursue coherent and resolute anti-corruption. Losses to the public purse help sustain a broader dysfunction of insufficient capacity, bad infrastructure or poor management, which helps corruption systems take root. This explains why some sectors suffer from an endless cycle of corruption (see Figure 2).

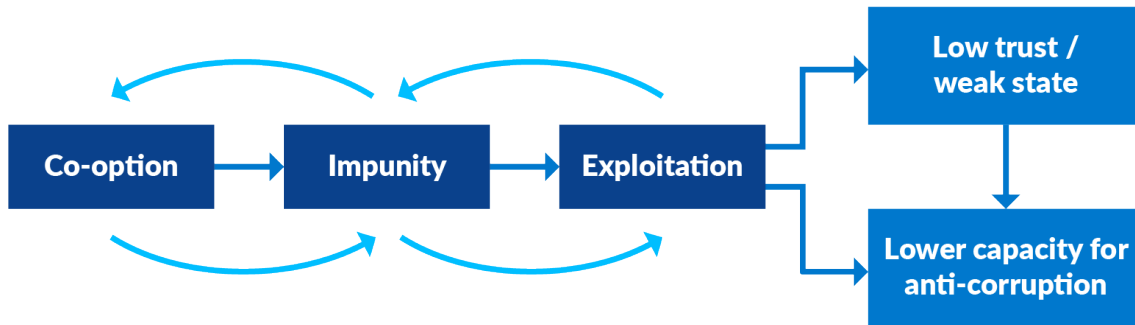
24. 2016.

25. Czitrom, 2016a.

26. Czitrom, 2016b.

27. Czitrom, 2016b.

Figure 2. The corruption system dynamic



Underlying this pattern is the enabling force of money, extracted through corrupt means. Leaks, embezzlement, fraud and bribery are methods of extracting resources from public budgets that are reinvested into co-opting public officials or politicians, buying off potential whistleblowers or other forms of accountability. These resources can also be used to manipulate employment processes or elections, investments that help keep the system intact. Therefore, in corruption systems, even small-scale corruption has insidious consequences. Resources lost via corruption affect individual pockets but also create the scaffolding for sustaining corruption systems. This makes anti-corruption efforts more important: protecting against corruption losses are not only monetary, but also have profound consequences for the quality of institutions.

Systemic resistance to anti-corruption

Networks within corruption systems will always seek to defend the system. Such ‘systemic resistance’ will often nullify conventional anti-corruption approaches. Systemic resistance can mean that increasing oversight or transparency will have little effect. Returning to the health system example, perhaps those responsible for monitoring are co-opted into a ‘coalition of the corrupt’, meaning that within a hospital there may be few people with the will or autonomy to really monitor and sanction corruption. Banerjee et al.²⁸ cite an empirical study evaluating an intervention which used a timestamp to inform public officials when nurses were absent from work, so their pay could be docked. The study shows that the scheme ultimately failed because local administrators colluded with nurses to undermine the scheme, implying systemic elements.²⁹

28. 2008.

29. Kosack and Fung (2014) explain that sectors where there is little competition among providers, and where neither providers nor politicians and policymakers appear willing to reform – contexts symptomatic of corruption systems – are the most difficult context for transparency and accountability interventions.

Systemic resistance can also mean that approaches based on introducing new rules or procedures won't change the underlying practices of the system. Corruption systems are held together by embedded rules. Following alternative integrity rules, for example, can come at a cost as it means violating the informal codes, often propagated and enforced by powerful people. Because systems have these opt-out costs, individuals may feel that the best option is to stay in the system and evade legal or procedural changes that aim to reduce corruption. Rule-based approaches only seem to be effective where there is autonomous capacity to enforce changes. Within corruption systems, those responsible for enforcing rules are often embroiled in the system. Many ethnographic studies show that, despite legal reforms, many corrupt practices persist because they are 'tightly controlled by tacit codes and practical norms...that differ from official and legal norms...'³⁰

Systemic resistance may also mean that typical anti-corruption reforms, even if they are successful in implementing measures against a specific practice, merely result in corruption displacement rather than control. Corruption systems tend to be adaptive, constantly ready to seek out new chances for illicit gain.

Research in Tanzania points out that a clamp down on bribes in the health sector meant that gifts then became the material fuel of the system, which adapted its internal mechanics to keep going.³¹ Evidence suggests that evasion and regrowth are characteristic features of corruption systems. For example, David-Barrett and Fazekas³² show how the World Bank's reforms to their procurement processes merely displaced corruption, with corrupt actors eluding new procedures by shifting their focus to areas with weaker controls.³³

Systemic resistance can also mean that anti-corruption is instrumentalised to defend the system and make it easier to pursue corruption. Accountability institutions can be hijacked, captured and weaponised by networks and powerful groups.³⁴ Anti-corruption commissions and special corruption courts, along with tax authorities, the police, courts and other institutions, can be used by corruption systems to extend impunity. Therefore, practitioners should be wary of reverse-engineering typical accountability processes and mechanisms onto these embedded forms of corruption – an approach that can backfire.

30. Olivier de Sardan and Blundo, 2006.

31. Baez Camargo, 2022.

32. 2020.

33. David-Barrett and Fazekas, 2020.

34. Jackson and Amundsen, 2021.

3. Addressing systems by building resilience into anti-corruption

Contesting corruption systems is highly difficult, but necessary. It is a false economy to target symptoms only: without attempts to address the underlying causes of corruption systems, there is likely to be a constant clustering and regrowth of corruption. Impact can be measured against the extent to which corruption systems have been weakened (more convictions for corruption, more synergy between formal and informal processes, less corruption in elections) and the extent to which alternative systems based on integrity and accountability have been strengthened (higher trust in institutions, better sectoral performance, greater sensitivity towards potential corruption).

These efforts will always need direct forms of anti-corruption that improve transparency, strengthen enforcement and accelerate legal reforms, or enhance monitoring and oversight. Some experts overstate the need for a ‘radical break’ in anti-corruption policies, setting up unhelpful either/or choices between conventional institutional enforcement and alternative approaches (often reflecting an overstated distinction between ‘principal agent’ and ‘collective action’ descriptions of the problem).

Direct forms of anti-corruption can act as constraints on corruption systems, checking their expansion.³⁵ However, due to systemic resistance, typical anti-corruption efforts have an ever-present risk of implementation failure when working against corruption systems. This is one reason why the evidence generally suggests that conventional anti-corruption approaches have struggled to achieve sustainable results in sectors.³⁶ Efforts tend to wilt under the pressure of systemic resistance: new anti-corruption laws are circumvented or fail to change behaviour; oversight institutions struggle to fulfil their mandates as their agendas are appropriated; and no amount of training for workers in a country’s bureaucracies can help to change prevailing ‘corrupt’ organisational norms.

The typical vulnerability that anti-corruption has to systemic resistance can only be addressed by building more resilience into anti-corruption efforts. Resilience is the capacity for anti-corruption initiatives to adapt to, navigate, and contest systemic resistance. Resilience doesn’t always require more resources – though

35. Baez Camargo, 2022.

36. Johnson, Taxell and Zaum, 2012; Disch, 2009; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020.

sufficiently financed anti-corruption is a prerequisite. We argue that resilience is about: building efficiency into efforts through targeted approaches; making more informed design choices based on context and sensitivity to how systems operate; and allowing actors in sectors to challenge the power differences that sustain corruption systems.

Targeting problems

More resilient anti-corruption considers impact and efficiency, and prioritises corruption problems: dealing with the corruption that most constrains outcomes in a sector. The priority changes from reducing corruption *to* anti-corruption reforms providing a way to enhance sectoral outcomes – such as better teacher training, more equitable supply of medical drugs, or more cost-effective road building. This means seeing anti-corruption as a ‘developmental’ concern and a way to contribute to the fundamental foundations of sectoral work, rather than as a separate workstream aimed at only fighting graft. Such an approach requires close coordination with sectoral experts.

Prioritising high-impact corruption targets requires reflection and analysis. This means using existing methods to gather as much research and information about corruption in a particular sector, then relating it to a broader set of sectoral priorities that should be outlined in national government strategies. A U4 analysis of Albania’s education sector demonstrates the steps that can be taken to identify and evaluate corrupt practices in a sector.³⁷ A novel method in the health sector builds consensus on corruption priorities, drawing on the knowledge of a wide range of sectoral stakeholders.³⁸ The Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) toolkit by the Building State Capability Program can help to prioritise aims, deconstruct and make connections between underlying causes and symptoms.³⁹

System-sensitive anti-corruption

Building resilience also means having stronger theories of change. This means making better choices about anti-corruption design. Measures to avoid are those that are likely to be voided or captured by the corrupt system. Approaches to

37. Uberti, 2020.

38. Onwujekwe et al., 2019.

39. Pritchett, Andrews and Woolcock, 2012.

follow are those that can circumvent systemic resistance. This depends on generating sufficient and reliable information about the corruption system by scrutinising each of the constituent parts: the elements (the who), the interconnections (the how) and the functions (the why).

It is important to understand the actors involved in a sector's corruption system networks. They can range from professional staff and politicians working and responsible for a specific sector, to business owners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and those with technical knowledge, such as lawyers and accountants. Social network analysis is one tool that can help reveal network patterns. Sarah Baker's use of this research tool in the Indonesian forestry sector shows who associates with corrupt networks and whose interests they serve.⁴⁰ Case study approaches using expert interviews is another technique to map network actors.⁴¹ Awareness of networks can help practitioners know who to keep an eye on when implementing policies. This vigilance is especially important when corrupt actors respond to anti-corruption by shifting the corruption or using new tactics. The research can also clarify who may be a genuine ally in moving strategies forward.

Anti-corruption efforts should engage with the reality of how corruption systems operate. Understanding the expectations, codes and informal rules that provide the supportive structure for these systems can help make choices about the most feasible entry points for reform. This can be done through qualitative mapping and interviews. Scharbatke-Church and colleagues'⁴² research into the underlying causes explaining the unwillingness of public servants to act against corruption in Uganda emphasises how norms of mutual protection can become entrenched within organisations.⁴³ Because of these norms, the authors argue that efforts should be made to address the social norms that exacerbate institutional weaknesses and motivate or encourage civil servants' behaviour.⁴⁴ Baez Camargo's anti-corruption work in the Tanzanian health sector demonstrates how understanding how a system operates sheds a light on feasible entry points for reform.⁴⁵ Baez Camargo⁴⁶ argues that the social interactions involved in sustaining corrupt behaviours can give rise to tensions, for example, if personal attitudes around gift-giving clash with social norms.

40. Baker, 2020.

41. Chayes, 2016.

42. 2020.

43. Scharbatke-Church, Atim and Chigas, 2020.

44. Scharbatke-Church, Atim and Chigas, 2020.

45. Baez Camargo, 2022.

46. 2022.

These tensions can be constructive spaces to engage sectoral staff on behaviour change efforts.⁴⁷

Understanding the *why* requires a sense of the broader social and economic setting and the purposes that these systems serve. Analysing system purpose beyond private gain helps to understand the motivations and interests fuelling the system. Anti-corruption efforts should be built around a consideration of these incentive structures that help practitioners anticipate the types of reforms that may be resisted or welcomed, and where they will be found.

Purposes can be political, for example, illicit gains used to reinvest in political campaigns.⁴⁸ If this is the case, then anti-corruption may threaten the interests of power-seeking political actors. Political economy analysis can help identify these dynamics. Janine Wedel's 2021 guide provides a set of questions to help understand many of these dimensions.⁴⁹ Systems can also be fuelled by social norms that lock in forms of behaviour.⁵⁰ Mapping these can help understand social pressures that also create incentive structures. Scharbatke-Church et al.⁵¹ present novel maps of corruption in the criminal justice system in the Central African Republic, which depict some of the norms that cause corruption.⁵²

Social empowerment

Even if used in context, the conventional suite of anti-corruption approaches alone may do little to change the underlying power relations and vulnerabilities that explain why systems persist. Michael Johnston⁵³ first discussed an approach that could address the deeper challenges of unequal and unaccountable power. He argued for greater emphasis on 'social empowerment' as a core anti-corruption strategy. This means 'widening expanding and protecting the range of political and economic resources, and alternatives, open to ordinary citizens.'⁵⁴ This paper revives Johnston's broad concept but thinks through how it can be operationalised in sectoral approaches to anti-corruption. We offer a strategy with two pillars: empower collective action and reduce

47. Baez Camargo, 2022.

48. Jackson and Amundsen, 2021.

49. Wedel, 2021.

50. Jackson and Köbis, 2018.

51. 2017.

52. Scharbatke-Church, Barnard-Webster and Woodrow, 2017.

53. 1998.

54. Johnston, 1998.

vulnerabilities to corruption. These are not necessarily new models of action, but in practice these are not always considered as part of anti-corruption strategies.

Empowering collective action

Contesting the power of corruption systems requires an equal force of collective action.⁵⁵ Corruption systems are not all-encompassing, smothering all agency, processes and institutions to make reform impossible. Many of those caught by the systems may also want to change them, but they need possibilities for sustained mobilisation within sectors. Empowering collective action – whether between or among, administrators, senior managers, community groups, individual citizens, business or political actors – can lead to system change from the inside out. Groups can push for accountability constraints, create narratives for changes, and maintain constant vigilance to resist corruption systems fighting back.⁵⁶

Anti-corruption practice has rarely been capable of nurturing sustained collective action in sectors. A review of two decades of programming in Eastern Europe suggests that ‘few donor programs [are] designed to foster collective action, leadership, and media activity’.⁵⁷ Nurturing collective action in sectors requires interventions that go beyond modifications to typical civil society approaches, such as funding NGOs, social accountability measures, or awareness campaigns. These have rarely shown lasting effectiveness in challenging the underlying power differences that corruption systems depend on.⁵⁸

Imaginative approaches are required to encourage collective action. Interventions should be aimed at understanding and overcoming constraints to collective action, especially among disadvantaged groups. ‘Barrier analysis’ can offer a practical way to understand the reasons why people are reluctant to cooperate.⁵⁹ Establishing incentive-driven collective action can help sustain mobilisation for the longer term. Mushtaq Khan⁶⁰ argues that framing anti-corruption as a way to resolve sectoral challenges and improve individual

55. Fisman and Golden, 2017.

56. Development Leadership Program (DLP), 2018.

57. Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015.

58. Johnson, Taxell and Zaum, 2012.

59. See for example: Kittle, 2013.

60. 2019.

interests, rather than address moral failure, can motivate various groups and individuals to come together in a sustainable way.⁶¹

Supporting a long-term collective action infrastructure with financial and technical support is also important. Providing ‘safe spaces’ to build trust, encourage discussions and negotiations can help coalitions grow.⁶² Funding peer self-help networks can help sustain reforms in the face of opposition, providing solidarity, resilience, information-sharing, and a sense of mutual care for members. Effective interventions would see reform coalitions emerge as mobilisers, advocates, networkers, and entrepreneurs for reform, resolute enough to withstand resistance.

Recent research establishes that social empowerment is also built on positive narratives for change.⁶³ Practitioners can also support the development of change narratives. These could show how alternatives to the corruption system can provide different solutions, help to understand why change is important, and shift assumptions about the nature of systems.⁶⁴ The narratives that emerge should therefore be locally defined and ‘made recognisable and acceptable within prevailing political and cultural standards, practices and norms of the host society.’⁶⁵

Reduce vulnerability by addressing dysfunction

Corruption systems are strengthened by co-option. The more people are involved or indifferent, the more corruption systems thrive. Co-option is often a result of sectors not achieving their goals due to dysfunction. When, for example, civil servants are ill-equipped, senior management is poor, or funding is chronically inadequate, trust in the official processes to provide public services sinks, so people – often the most vulnerable in society whether determined by gender, social class, ethnicity, or income – may seek alternatives, often using corrupt means. Corruption can be seen as a steadier and more predictable ‘fix’ than a legitimate, institutional equivalent that is absent, dysfunctional, or distrusted.

61. Khan, Andreoni and Roy, 2019.

62. Development Leadership Program (DLP), 2018.

63. Nazneen, 2019.

64. Nazneen, 2019. p. 27.

65. Leftwich, 2009; Booth and Unsworth, 2014.

For example, in the absence of a straightforward and functional system of tax rules, local businesspeople invest in a system of bribes with tax officials to avoid fines and secure lower taxes. As the scheme seems to serve everyone's interests, it becomes embedded as a system. Another example: without sufficient funding and efficient administration in a rural region, teachers may demand flexibility to skip teaching obligations to tutor private clients and earn top-up pay. Because this absenteeism provides teachers with enough incentives to stay in place and to keep educational services going, the practice becomes institutionalised.

Social empowerment means reducing co-option into corruption systems through tackling underlying fiscal, managerial, or institutional dysfunction so that people, such as businessmen and teachers, are less vulnerable and have more freedom to reject corruption fixes – in relation to the examples above, this could be done through the digitalisation of tax administration and through better funded and organised rural schools. Few anti-corruption approaches actively attempt to consider how broader sectoral dysfunction can be supportive to anti-corruption agendas. This might be because this feels like too much of an indirect approach.

Building resilience means making specific plans to understand and address the broader dysfunction in sectors. Once initial trust in a particular institution has been established, citizens may insist on further improvements in those institutions rather than returning to a corrupt system. Marquette and Pfeiffer⁶⁶ offer a useful framework to use to identify the functionality of corruption.⁶⁷ Incorporating vulnerable voices is essential, and special efforts should be made to reach out and be guided by their concerns and wishes.

Stronger emphasis can be also given to long-term solutions to achieve better functioning bureaucracies in sectors. Erin Metz McDonnell⁶⁸ studied how a bureaucratic ethos based on impartiality and delivery emerges in developing countries.⁶⁹ She argues for a clustering talent and skills in sectors because, over time, these clusters become self-protecting and can challenge cultures of corruption. This can be achieved through human resource strategies that band together highly skilled public servants in specific sectors.⁷⁰

66. 2021.

67. Marquette and Peiffer, 2021, p. 22.

68. 2020.

69. McDonnell, 2020.

70. McDonnell, 2020.

Final thoughts: From short-term cycles to robust, longer-term planning.

Not all corruption is part of a system. But when systemic elements are present, a qualitatively different type of problem is posed for practitioners in their sectoral work. We have argued that dealing with corruption systems compared to transactional corruption requires a deliberate emphasis on building resilience into anti-corruption efforts.

Table 2. Transactional corruption and corruption systems compared

	Transactional corruption	Corruption systems
Who	Few, working separately	Networks, organised groups
Through	Clandestine, sporadic activity	Shared codes, norms and practices
To what end	Personal enrichment	Serves broader socio-economic function and ambitions
Enabling conditions	Weak enforcement, legal gaps, capacity constraints.	Unaccountable power, patronage networks, broader dysfunction, lack of trust
Consequences on governance	Efficiency losses, unpredictability	Impunity, institutional decay, exploitation.
Strategies to address	Legal and enforcement approaches, capacity building, social accountability.	Targeted approaches, system-sensitive design, social empowerment.

Pursuing strategies to address corruption systems will mean practitioners need to plan differently. As corruption systems cannot change overnight, practitioners should be prepared for cycles of anti-corruption: plan, implement, reflect, plan, and so on. The current propensity to fit anti-corruption efforts within typical two- or three-year cycles restricts the possibility to contest corruption systems in this adaptive, context sensitive way.⁷¹ Mason⁷² argues for a longer-term planning framework for anti-corruption, requiring a stronger practitioner presence on the ground.⁷³

Finally, separate work areas must be broken down. In particular, anti-corruption must shift towards being seen as an enabler of the Sustainable

71. Mason, 2021.

72. 2021.

73. Mason, 2021.

Development Goals, and as an entry point for broader developmental progress across different sectors, rather than something 'done' just by a technical group of anti-corruption experts with narrow aims. Viewing it through this developmental lens expands the significance and goals of anti-corruption, opening it up to a broader range of initiatives, tactics and programmes. It means that anti-corruption should be co-constructed by those working across a range of areas – from those professionals working in sectors to communication specialists.

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