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Editorial

From the Political Economy of Corruption to Political Opportunity Analysis: Corruption, Capture, and the Democratic Project Defended

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In an effort to diminish the pervasive nature of corruption and to lower its prevalence, South Africa has instituted a range of anti-corruption initiatives, strategies, and legislative frameworks within the nation. All these measures and frameworks exhibit a thorough and systematic approach. While it is essential to engage in a thorough examination of these measures and juxtapose various viewpoints regarding the efficacy of anti-corruption initiatives in South Africa, it remains unfeasible to encapsulate the multitude of opinions, perspectives, and arguments within a single study (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2024, 459).

Introduction

Anti-corruption scholarship is highly effective at explaining ‘what *not* to do’ (Heeks and Mathisen 2012, 540, original emphasis). Political economy analysis has deepened the understanding of corruption, state capture, elite bargains and institutional failure, but often stops at diagnosis. As Zinnbauer (2025) argues, what is still missing is ‘a political economy analysis of the possible’ or, more precisely, a political opportunity analysis that identifies where systems are sufficiently malleable for reform to emerge.

This Special Issue commences from this premise. While examining the political economy of corruption in South Africa, it also turns attention to the individuals, institutions and practices that continue creating opportunities for reform in deeply adverse governance conditions. Rather than asking only why corruption persists, the contributions collectively explore how sound governance is created, defended and expanded under real-world political conditions.

The Special Issue assembles the opinions, perspectives, and arguments of development practitioners, officials, non-governmental organisations (Good Governance Africa, Democracy Development Programme), an investigative journalist and academics on the effectiveness of South Africa’s anti-corruption initiatives, strategies and legislative frameworks in addressing and reducing the prevalence of corruption and maleficence. This Special Issue lays claim neither to being comprehensive nor to being representative of the expanse and spectrum of opinions, perspectives and arguments. It is, however, the first collection of its kind featuring contributions from officials, development practitioners, research and advocacy civil society organisations, the media and academics within a single study. These varied contributions and combinations in a single study are arguably worthy of reproduction in anti-corruption scholarship, more generally, and to close the gap, more urgently, between the conventions, training programmes and diagnostics of the anti-corruption industry and the everyday activities of those actively fighting corruption in the real-world contexts of the undue influence of money, syndicates, mafias, police corruption and assassinations.

South Africa is a signatory to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003) and the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (2003), and its anti-corruption legislative framework aligns with international best practice (Labik Amanquandor 2024). Adherence to international laws, governance standards, and anti-corruption norms, critics charge, serves a legitimising function, allowing states to signal conformity with global best practice internationally, while substantive implementation is limited (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013).

The gap between the enactment and selective enforcement of laws in South Africa is plugged by a politics of appeasement—arresting the middleman in the corruption syndicate, the runner, but leaving the race intact. The public is ‘made to feel that the state is at work,

but the system producing the runner is untouched, well fed and elegantly dressed' (Mncube 2026). More damaging than the politics of appeasement is the normalisation of corruption's permanence. Every investigation from the Public Protector's State of Capture Report (2016) to the Zondo's State Capture Commission (2018–2022) and now the Madlanga Commission into alleged criminality, political interference and corruption in the criminal justice system have spotlighted the state's incapacity to translate findings into meaningful institutional reform: 'This paradox means South Africa simultaneously documents capture and reproduces it, exposing corruption while normalising its permanence' (Mantoshi, Gaborone and Ndimande 2025).

The persistence and pervasiveness of corruption and the limited purchase of voluminous and technically complex international best practice legislation (Labik Amanquandor 2024) is evidenced in the regular scandals, misappropriation of funds, wasteful and unauthorised expenditure and tender irregularities. The harassment, victimisation, intimidation, legal warfare waged against ethical officials, and assassinations reflects the disconnect between 'top-down' anti-corruption policies and 'ground-level' realities (Bautista-Beauchesne and Garzon 2019, 732).

The Special Issue connects (top-down) anti-corruption policies and ground-level reality by front-centring the struggles and stories of ethical officials who chose to and continue discharging their duties guided by policy, legislation and regulation. These individuals and institutions are identified as defenders of the democratic project who are divided, not without qualifications, into symbolic beacons (bearing testimony to the possibility and viability of reform despite current circumstances), positive outliers (achieving unexpectedly positive outcomes with the same resources despite prevailing constraints) and islands of integrity (sustaining effectiveness in adverse governance conditions). Further elaboration of this taxonomy, and qualifications follows shortly.

Using purposive sampling, interviewees were sourced through professional networks and established relationships with civil society partners active in governance and anti-corruption advocacy. These individuals shared experiences and insights, because they trusted the editors and were confident of the protection of their identity and integrity of narrative in accordance with the provisions of the University of Pretoria's Research Ethics Review Committee, which categorised this as a "high risk, high security" project. These provisions were detailed in the informed consent forms signed by all interviewees, including the right to withdraw at any stage of the project and anonymisation of identity. After interviews were edited, the transcriptions were sent to the interviewees for approval and sign-off to inform the commentary. The opinions contained in the commentaries (Khan and Scholtz, Kolevsohn, Khan and Kolevsohn) are solely and exclusively those of the authors, and not the interviewees, nor their present employers.

The interviewees were all former or are currently—with the exclusion of an anonymous official who has left the public service—senior officials located at the apex of state institutions (administrator, city manager, chief executive officers, accounting officer) and other participants occupying various high-level posts across the public service for close to thirty years (see Adam's 'Practitioner's Encounter of Corruption: A Passage from Apartheid to Post-Apartheid Corruption'). Save for the Administrator, Johann Mettler, all identities were anonymised, with one participant, a former chief executive officer of a state-owned entity, withdrawing from the project abruptly. This anonymised interview—titled 'The Minister has spoken. It's just like God has made a determination, and all we must do is follow, regardless'—plus commentary (Khan and Scholtz)—was sent to the anonymous official for perusal, feedback and approval. Thereafter, all communication ended. Repeated attempts to contact the official were unsuccessful. An informed consent form was signed by the official, but the editors considered it appropriate to exclude the interview and commentary from the Special Issue.

The decision to exclude the interview and commentary (Khan and Scholtz) further reduced, we acknowledge, the already slim study sample; however, there were not many officials who we identified through snowball sampling that were willing to go on record, even if anonymised. This is partly related to an underlying theme of the Special Issue about the intimidation, abuse and even illegal arrest of competent and ethical officials by politicians and their misuse of state agencies and legal processes. The relentless persecution and prosecution of ethical officials—accounting officers obliged to govern within the four corners of statute, regulation and bylaw—who refuse to bend to the illegal biddings and illegal enrichment schemes of politicians and political parties silences all competent and principled officials. The question raised by all officials and practitioners in the Special Issue is whether politicians and political parties, the guardians of the Constitution (RSA 1996) and the drafters of legislation, stand above and outside both constitution and legislation, scapegoating underlings, while punishing ethical officials, legally obliged to abide by both Constitution and laws, at the taxpayers expense.

The practitioners, interviewees, and commentaries in the Special Issue proceed beyond communicating and extending knowledge of corruption's pervasiveness and persistence. Money's undue influence, party rent-seeking, patronage, capture, mafia, organised crime and police corruption is the real-world context of local government—the 'worst managed and the least paid attention to' sphere of government (Madzivhandila, labour analyst cited in Mahlangu 2026). These contributors raise searching questions about holding power to account, guided by the South African Constitution, legislation and regulation in the real-world context. The shift in emphasis from explaining corruption to interpreting the conditions under which power is held to account and accountability is enforced, emerged as a crucial insight of the project deserving future scholarly research.

Mainstream anti-corruption approaches place disproportionate emphasis on formal institutions, legal compliance, and externally derived governance models, but reforms cannot be ends in themselves. Why do reformers steer clear of power, political economy, social norms, and lived realities (Johnston and Fritzen 2021; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Persson et al. 2013)? Why do reformers say so little about the contemporary erosion of democracy, waning institutional trust, and political disengagement of the poor caused by rising inequality, which in turn increases the ability of elites to capture institutions and warp outcomes towards further inequality? Why do reformers choose to bury their heads in the dirt while millions of GenZ protestors in South Asia, North and East Africa flood the streets, blaming dwindling economic opportunities, remote institutions and democratic marginalisation as ‘all conditions connected by one thing: corruption’ (Eyakuze 2025). Globally, the youth demand ‘transparency, inclusion, dignity, and genuine public agency’ (Eyakuze 2025). However, these youth, along with ‘courageous local activists exposing brutal corruption in their home countries; individuals and groups who are harassed, jailed, and even murdered for exposing corruption’ (Sampson 2010, 277), ‘speak and act in a manner that is wholly foreign to the everyday activities of actors in the anti-corruption industry of conventions, training programmes and diagnostics’ (Sampson 2010, 264). The disjunct between the industry and ground-level reality tragically bedevils South Africa too.

The Special Issue presents a political economy analysis of corruption, on the one hand, and a political opportunity analysis, on the other hand, because ‘...what is missing in everyday political economy analysis is the creative, yet grounded consideration of where change can come from and lead to—a political economy analysis of the possible—or better: a political opportunity analysis that considers the possibility and reality of altered and evolving interest matrices’ (Zinnbauer 2025).

Moving beyond interrogating the dynamics of dysfunctional and captured systems, political opportunity analysis looks to shifting dynamics via ‘encouraging different behaviours in the given landscape of power, incentives and institutions’ (Hudson 2025b). Political opportunity analysis is about ‘sensing where the system is malleable, where small shifts might propagate meaningful change’—rendering it a ‘more action-oriented and more useful for the change agents and the transformation project’ (Hudson 2025a). In summary, political opportunity analysis, in contrast with political economy, directs attention towards individuals, institutions, narratives and practices that create conditions and opportunities for accountability and reform within constrained governance environments.

To explore the possibilities for accountability and reform, the practitioner contributions and interviews were grouped into three heuristic categories: symbolic beacons; positive outliers and islands of integrity. Symbolic beacons illuminate alternative moral and political possibilities (Mettler, Anonymous Official, Robertson); positive outliers achieve unusually positive outcomes despite operating under the same constraints as their peers (Cullinan, Anonymous Official); and islands of integrity sustaining effectiveness, professionalism and ethical practice within otherwise compromised governance environments (Anonymous Senior Official at the Special Investigating Unit) (see Table 1 below). The proposed heuristic categories are not mutually exclusive, and several contributions could reasonably be located in more than one category.

Table 1: Political Opportunity Analysis

Symbolic Beacons	Positive Outliers	Islands of Integrity
Johann Mettler: <i>The hunter often becomes the hunted</i> Interview of administrator, presently city manager at Tshwane municipality (Gauteng) plus commentary (see Khan and Scholtz)	Matt Cullinan: <i>Small town, big shakes</i> Practitioner Essay, presently chief executive officer of Atlantis Special Economic Zone for Green Technologies (Western Cape)	Anon: <i>My focus is on tackling corruption decisively, investigating high-profile cases thoroughly, and ensuring that justice is served</i> Interview of senior official from the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) plus commentary (see Khan and Kolevsohn)
Anon: <i>The civil service has become a graveyard for competent and ethical officials</i> Interview of a senior official, previously served as accounting officer of a state-owned water entity, plus commentary (see Kolevsohn)	Anon: <i>The Minister has spoken. It's just like God has made a determination, and all we must do is follow, regardless.</i> Interview of senior official, previously chief executive officer of a state-owned water entity plus Commentary who abruptly withdrew from project.	
Heather Robertson: <i>The burden of bearing witness: South African journalism, corruption and the case for a protected fourth estate</i> (Online day editor of <i>Daily Maverick</i> and editor of the weekly newspaper <i>DM168</i>)		

The division of the contributors into the three categories will undoubtedly be criticised, suffice to mention that literature on anti-corruption cases where performance has been better than expected in poor governance environments—labelled “islands of integrity”; “pockets of productivity”; “pockets of effectiveness”; “islands of excellence”; “positive deviants” and “positive outliers”—include well-performing public sector reforms; effective institutions or organisations; and impressive individual leaders fostering and implementing progressive policies. All interviewees were involved in and/or are implementing public sector reforms to enhance organisational performance, all interviewees strived to and/or pursue organisational effectiveness and all interviewees are ethical officials and notable leaders who succeeded in promoting and implementing progressive policies guided by the Constitution, legislation and regulations.

Given the expected disagreement over the categorisation, the editors have heeded the advice of a complexity thinker who reminds:

‘Not to make too much of a science out of the search for positive deviance’, retaining instead ‘its lightness, nimble ambition and non-mechanistic application to map a broader opportunity space, find new potential levers and assemblages that may or may not be useful for making change’ (Hudson 2025b).

The interviews, commentary and practitioner contributions mapped and mined opportunity spaces, identified levers of change, and designed new assemblages to effect change. However, interventions to support and create conditions for the realisation of desired behaviours and social change will by definition be incomplete without laying bare the experience of ethical officials who failed in battling corruption; however, like those who triumphed, they risked family, career, social status, limb and life. The Special Issue covers two cases of whistleblowers—titled ‘The civil service has become a graveyard for competent and ethical officials’ (Anon under symbolic beacon above) and ‘The Minister has spoken. It’s just like God has made a determination, and all we must do is follow, regardless’ (Anon under positive outlier above)—both senior officials who confronted harassment, victimisation, false imprisonment and ‘malicious investigations’ (see Section Four below). The story of the former official is anonymised in the Special Issue. As mentioned above, the latter senior government official, a lawyer, ceased all communication weeks before the writing of this Editorial, and the story of the former official is anonymised in the Special Issue.

It is, however, foolhardy to separate the political economy and political opportunity analyses, because papers concerned with power and vested interests versus those of beacons, outliers and islands of integrity, respectively, repeatedly surface the same themes: power; political economy; human rights; social justice; legitimacy; institutional culture; leadership; social norms and public meaning. Collectively, these papers—peer-reviewed, practitioner insights and interviews—recalibrate the analytical compass towards the social, institutional and political conditions sustaining corruption and malfeasance. In this Special Issue, both political economy and political opportunity analyses are united in their commitment to sound governance and social justice as inseparable components of the democratic project undergirding effective anti-corruption reform.

Consequently, this Special Issue explores corruption as a governance challenge connected to power, legitimacy, democratic accountability, civic participation, institutional resilience and public meaning. By foregrounding stories of resistance, reform, and integrity alongside analyses of failure and state capture, the Special Issue seeks to enrich anti-corruption scholarship towards more context-sensitive understandings; that is, learning from those who resisted and continue resisting corruption at great personal, professional and financial cost and how best to ameliorate costs, reduce harm and nurture an enabling, responsive and protective environment for ethical officials and whistleblowers.

Taken together, the contributions move from the political economy of corruption to its construction in everyday social meaning, and towards identifying practical opportunities for institutional renewal. The collection culminates by reconnecting diagnosis with practice, aiming at expanding anti-corruption scholarship from the abstract to decoding how reform emerges, survives and expands under difficult political and governance conditions.

The contributions are organised around five interconnected themes. Section Two examines corruption through the lenses of political economy, social justice, human rights and developmental governance. Section Three explores corruption as a social and cultural phenomenon shaped by norms, narratives, and collective meanings. Section Four develops the political opportunity analysis through symbolic beacons, positive outliers and the island of integrity. Section Five reconnects the political economy and the political opportunity perspectives through practitioner accounts, nationally (Adam) and internationally (Moloi and Kolevsohn). Adam reflects on corruption, governance and accountability spanning apartheid and the present. Moloi and Kolevsohn interview Justice Richard Goldstone to trace the evolution of the initiative to establish the International Anti-Corruption Court for the global enforcement of anti-corruption. The Conclusion details the limitations of mainstream anti-corruption studies, the double standards, the ignorance of the conditions it attempts to remedy, and areas for further research distilled from the project and the varied contributions.

Section Two: Power, political economy and corruption

The failure of anti-corruption reforms resides in their inability to ‘reallocate power’ and ‘discipline entrenched local actors’ (Fukuyama and Recanatini 2018, 52). Levelling power imbalances is what reformers have been ‘most reluctant to confront’ (Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 21).

Khan and Patel, Mohamed, and Hermanus interrogate corruption and state capture through political economy, heterodox economics and regime reform lenses, respectively. South Africa is the ‘most extreme example of an extractive economy in the modern world’, dominated by ‘one of the most concentrated oligarchies in the world’ (Duigan 2026, 6, 4). Oligarchic rule, the politics of the defence of wealth, an underappreciated problem in South Africa’s political economy, is everywhere, argue Khan and Patel, entrenching and deepening inequality. Rising inequality degrades democratic institutions, erodes trust in government, and hastens the political disengagement of the poor. This, in turn, is increasing the ability of the elite to dominate policymaking, warping policies, institutions, and governance towards greater inequality. Khan and Patel contend that inequality, democratic backsliding—undermining of checks and balances, the restriction of civil liberties, and the manipulation of elections—and state capture are inextricably linked. Front-centring social justice, the paper appeals for a re-orientation of the mainstream anti-corruption discourse towards engagement with the defence of wealth by disrupting the ‘business as usual’ approach of the ‘most corrupt private sector in the world’ (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2020) and limiting the undue influence of private money in politics.

Following from Khan and Patel’s rights-based social justice framing of effective anti-corruption reform, Jwili and Kolevsohn turn to the direct, traceable consequences of corruption and financial mismanagement on citizens’ constitutional rights to water, housing, equal treatment and participation (RSA 1996). Institutional design and political commitment are featured as primary drivers of differential rights outcomes. A robust local integrity system of participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment and linkage to law constitutes, for Jwili and Kolevsohn, the human rights infrastructure to extend and strengthen constitutional rights. The framing of anti-corruption as a constitutional mandate is an invaluable analytical lens for scholars and practitioners to evaluate municipal governance.

Applying a heterodox developmental economics framework, Mohamed constructs a link between the rampant corruption of the apartheid era and its continuity through the post-apartheid era. Mohamed takes issue with the state-market dichotomy of mainstream economic approaches to corruption, focussing instead on its manifestation over long periods of time in an economy with unusually high levels of market and wealth concentration. The dominant hegemony of corruption as generally a problem stemming from within the state is contested by Mohamed, arguing instead to focus attention on the corruption of the elites and aspirant elites within business and government. The failure of the post-apartheid government to build a developmental state capable of disciplining corporate power, directing the allocation of capital, and reducing extremely high levels of market and wealth concentration underwrites both poor economic performance and persistent corruption.

Hermanus’s case study of Eskom (South Africa’s state-owned power utility) references state capture and corruption to broader objectives of developmental governance. Hermanus meticulously details the mobilisation of political authority, institutional arrangements and public expenditure in support of—or in tension with—developmental objectives. Anchored in the evolution of South Africa’s electricity sector, the paper reintroduces normative questions into state capture debates by querying who benefits from governance arrangements. Unlike Khan and Patel’s and Mohamed’s historical political economy arc of corruption and state capture, Hermanus conceptualises state capture as a dynamic process of regime stabilisation and destabilisation unfolding across distinct political periods: the early democratic transition (1994–2008); the widely labelled “state capture” era (2009–2018) and the post-Zondo period (2019–2025). Hermanus’s conception of regime sector change contests the dominant binary characterisation of state capture as the opposite of a neutral, uncaptured ideal. Moments of state capture, Hermanus demonstrates, may emerge, recede and reconfigure without necessarily conforming to dramatic episodes of grand corruption.

Section Three: ‘Sensing and explaining where the system is malleable’: Meanings, norms and storytelling

Moving away from the political economy, heterodox economics and regime reform dynamics, the papers in Section Three frame corruption, following present scholarship, as a social and cultural phenomenon. Corruption persists, these contributors insist not only because institutions fail, but because social environments often normalise corrupt behaviour, rewarding loyalty over accountability, privileging fidelity over professionalism, punishing ethical officials and silencing whistleblowers, while compensating and supporting transgression. Anti-corruption reforms are too wrapped up in enactment and obsessed with enforcement, neglecting culture, communication and

collective sense-making. Social norms, narratives, identities and collective understandings determine the content and boundaries of acceptable and corrupt behaviour—in context. The contributions in this Section turn to how corruption is constructed, experienced and contested within everyday social life.

Kolevsohn and Martin, Chivandire and Saruchera, and Kariuki conceive of anti-corruption as fundamentally a process of social transformation. Societies interpret and decode complex phenomena through shared symbolic frameworks and common-sense understandings (Joffe 2003; Moscovici 1988). Anti-corruption, for Kolevsohn and Martin, is a social field of meaning. Accountability gains and losses in public legitimacy depend on narratives progressing beyond exposure towards visible consequences, institutional repair and democratic renewal. While the Zondo Commission created significant procedural and symbolic visibility, the absence of sustained prosecutions, visible sanctions and institutional consequences—narrative closure—risks weakening public trust further, stalling the reform momentum and relegating accountability to the appeasement and normalisation of corruption rather than achievement. Accountability, Kolevsohn and Martin demonstrate, is publicly constructed through recurring representations of collective responsibility, everyday oversight, whistleblowing, constitutional accountability, institutional impact, and imagined alternative futures. In short, narratives record accountability and also actively shape civic expectations, public trust, and participation.

Corruption in South Africa, Chivandire and Saruchera contend, is sustained by deeply embedded social norms surrounding loyalty, reciprocity and material success, overriding formal legal rules. Friendship, kinship and loyalty have their own social contract, governance principles and community institutions not registered in the mainstream anti-corruption discourse. The paper is a context-specific empirical contribution of vignette-based qualitative interviews probing citizens' interpretation of corruption in the everyday situations of police roadblocks, Home Affairs services, procurement processes, nepotism and sextortion. The paper prescribes direct engagement with the informal social expectations shaping behaviour in everyday governance interactions, encompassing norm-sensitive interventions beyond the purview of punitive approaches to anti-corruption reform.

There are various behavioural approaches—participatory, community and culture-centred and the entertainment-education strategy—to increase adoption of desired behaviours and facilitate social change. Storytelling is deemed critical to the 'effective SBCC [social behavioural change communication] interventions, constructing identity through narrative discourse', conveying a 'sense of belonging and willingness to participate' (White and Muturi 2023, 05) in anti-corruption reform. Like Chivandire and Saruchera, Kariuki shifts the focus of reforms away from enforcement to integrating cultural and normative change. Kariuki clarifies that corruption is socially constructed—normalised in everyday practices—summoning interventions to change public meanings, norms and identities, not only laws and sanctions. Storytelling renders corruption tangible, linking abstract governance failures to the 'lived harms of inequality and the denial of basic services'. By relaying lived experience, personal testimony and collective memory, storytelling holds the potential to amplify marginalised voices and foster civic engagement, thereby contextually anchoring anti-corruption, Kariuki advocates, in wider social justice agendas.

Section Four: 'Shifting dynamics and behaviours in the given landscape of power, incentives and institutions': A political opportunity analysis

In a letter to a young systems thinker, Jen Briselli, writes:

If you can learn to listen carefully, you find that systems speak. Not in words, but in patterns and anomalies...places that light up where an experiment or intervention can teach us more (2025).

Symbolic Beacons

Mettler: *The Hunter [Administrator] Often Becomes the Hunted*

Khan and Scholtz interviewed Johann Mettler, 'easily one of South Africa's most qualified and technocratic city managers'. Mettler is an Administrator, with constitutionally entrenched powers, tasked with exercising executive functions and administrative management of dysfunctional local councils to rectify failures in governance and service delivery. Mettler's approach to fixing dysfunctional municipalities pivots on 1) identifying those who are corrupt, 2) targeting these people, 3) putting controls in place and 4) replacing the corrupt people.

The key is to surround yourself with a team of [good] people, in finance, legal, human resources to weed out phantom employees and assist in determining which pockets we must trust and strengthen in service delivery—including cancelling contracts, recovering funds, and initiating and completing prosecutions.

Mettler's experience highlights a recurring theme across several contributions—effective reform rarely depends on individual competence alone. Administrators derive authority from the constitutional provisions and legislative obligations of national and provincial governments to intervene in dysfunctional municipalities. The ability of administrators to implement reforms is strengthened when political leaders at higher spheres of government support local recovery plans and projects (see practitioner essay by Cullinan below, whose success as a positive outlier was directly the result of the intervention of the Minister of Finance, the National Treasury, and the ANC's Luthuli House). Local government is the sphere most visibly affected by corruption and governance failure, yet it often receives the least sustained institutional and political support from provincial and national departments, focussed instead on other urgent priorities and battling their own limited capacities.

Interventions to fix municipalities, Mettler maintains, 'are not strong enough and the bad guys can sense it'. Investigations, criminal and civil actions, disciplinary actions and tightening governance measures, 'have limited effect as they fail to send strong messages that wrongful acts and behaviour is under scrutiny'. Weak investigative and oversight systems compound failure.

The whistleblower, Mettler insists, must be 'institutionally supported by the municipality and broader state because there is nothing that we can do without the whistleblower'.

Whistleblowers must know that they are safe and secure when they make their statements, and that their confidentiality will be protected. The implicated institution and its own whistleblowing system must be beyond reproach. Things must not leak... Whistleblowers need institutional support also from the criminal justice system because when they are exposed, they will be persecuted by those that are threatened. Our criminal justice system is a very important component of the support that ethical administrators would need, and they are not as responsive or effective as they should be. I now know here in this city where I am now [Tshwane], which police station I must just avoid in certain cases and so I must go directly to the provincial Hawks.

Anon: *The civil service has become a graveyard for competent and ethical officials.*

Kolevsohn interviewed an accounting officer of a state-owned entity. Anon rejected an emergency procurement directive issued by the executive authority on the grounds that it was unprofessional and unethical. As accounting officer and lawyer, Anon's legal and governance obligations were to protect the state-owned entity and to ensure compliance with procurement legislation. Anon was suspended without charges, subjected to prolonged disciplinary processes, and forced into expensive legal battles over several years. Criminal and civil proceedings were also instituted but ultimately failed. Anon contends that disciplinary processes, forensic investigations, and legal proceedings are 'weaponised' against officials who obstruct politically connected interests.

Ethical resistance may successfully prevent corruption, but imposes legal, financial and personal costs on principled officials without corresponding consequences for those initiating and applying undue pressures. Anon insists on urgent scrutiny of 'malicious investigations', which are politically motivated and funded by taxpayers to undermine accountability and institutional legitimacy. Anon proposes 'stronger oversight mechanisms' to evaluate the costs, motivations and outcomes of malicious investigations initiated against ethical officials and sustained, in several cases, over many years, even after the official has left the employ of the state.

Corruption manifests not only through completed financial transactions, but also via attempted interference, coercive influence, retaliatory investigations and institutional intimidation directed at ethical officials resisting politically connected interests. Present anti-corruption systems, Anon emphasises, 'continue to place disproportionate accountability on administrators while failing to adequately address political interference and patronage'. Kolevsohn's commentary is apposite:

Unless governance systems nurture and protect ethical resistance as vigorously as they pursue corruption, the public sector will continue to destroy and lose many of its finest to the grave dug by corrupt officials, and corrupt politicians too.

Robertson: *The Burden of Bearing Witness: South African Journalism, Corruption and the Case for a Protected Fourth Estate*

'Accountability journalism', Robertson astutely remarks, 'does not merely report on consequences, it creates them'.

The media's role in combating corruption is not supplementary to anti-corruption policy—it is one of its essential preconditions. The Muldergate scandal that shifted the apartheid state toward reform was driven by journalism, not by parliamentary oversight. The Zondo Commission that documented the full scale of state capture was built on an evidentiary record assembled by journalists, not by prosecutors. The ministers, officials, and corporations that repaid public funds did so because journalism made the alternative, continued concealment, impossible. Transparency enforced by journalism is the mechanism through which accountability becomes real.

But the ‘price paid by those who tell the truth about what the state does when no one is watching’ incurs grave costs. The two whistleblowers who leaked the Gupta files have fled the country and remain in exile. The toll on Greg Marinovich (photographer) and Professor Kate Alexander who worked on the Marikana massacre was severe. Alexander’s ‘office was broken into, electric fences were cut, laptops were stolen, and data was compromised’. Marinovich moved his family to the United States after securing a Harvard fellowship in 2013.

The state can assist investigative, watchdog and accountability journalism through feasible and practical financial and regulatory interventions. Firstly, ‘improved access to information must become enforceable, not aspirational’. Delayed enforcement and non-compliance have consistently undermined the Promotion of Access to Information Act (2000). Secondly, ‘whistleblowers and journalists must be legally and physically protected, not merely rhetorically’.

The Protected Disclosures Act (2000) has repeatedly failed those it was designed to protect. A revised framework must include judicial oversight of whistleblower identities, criminalisation of source exposure, and mandatory physical security assessments for journalists under threat.

Positive Outlier

Cullinan: *Small Town, Big Shakes*

Matt Cullinan is a town planner and presently the chief executive officer of the Atlantis Special Economic Zone for Green Technologies in the Western Cape. Predating the democratic transition, Cullinan had an ardent desire to transform apartheid’s spatial and human geography towards equality and equity as a technocrat, not a politician. The first democratic election and post-1994 dispensation gave free rein to utopian thinking of the future, but in retrospect, Cullinan writes, at ‘some distance from the scale of need and desperation of the poor Black majority’.

The practitioner essay relates the story of a corrupt Mayor extorting money, a ‘donation’ for the ANC from a small progressive urban planning company consulting in a nationally funded urban development project and insisting that the consultancy work with other local companies. All the companies complained bitterly of being ‘forced’ to pay up or be excluded from projects. The ‘donation’ to the Mayor, some local companies reported, was a regular requirement, often ongoing, to win bids in the municipality. Cullinan reported the Mayor’s ‘donation’ request to the National Treasury, which found its way to the (former) Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel. The ANC Mayor was summoned to Luthuli House and summarily fired. The executive, government department and political party were aligned in stomping out the corruption. The development project was completed in collaboration with local companies, meeting global standards for quality and professionalism.

Reflecting on current times, Cullinan lays the blame for the nationwide failure of municipalities squarely on the shoulders of politicians who are ‘demanding payment and misdirecting public funds—to finance their political parties and pay salaries to functionaries’. The ‘real, large-scale theft is driven by politicians’, bending procurement and contracting processes ‘to their ends’. Cullinan worries about organised crime operating in the ‘tender space’, demanding their 30 per cent for local content from contractors.

The 30 per cent [local content requirement] has evolved into a tool for extortion and rent seeking. Localisation through procurement has also been warped whereby the requirement for a local supplier is used to inflate tender prices with local politicians taking their cut.

Island of Integrity

Anon: *My focus is on tackling corruption decisively, investigating high-profile cases thoroughly, and ensuring that justice is served*

Khan and Kolevsohn interviewed a senior official from the Special Investigating Unit (SIU), generally regarded as one of South Africa’s most effective anti-corruption agencies. The SIU is an ‘island of integrity’ in the context of systemic corruption due to its ‘impressive track record of recovering stolen state funds, pursuing civil litigation through a Special Tribunal, and preventing further financial losses’ (Bruce, Ashton and Frank 2025, 04).

In an interview and separate commentary section, Khan and Kolevsohn attribute the reputation of the SIU to ‘building our own timber’, its record of success, the employee value proposition, thinking out of the box, financial autonomy, contractual flexibility and the whole-of-society approach to address corruption. There is the ever-present danger, Khan and Kolevsohn alert, of islands of integrity being washed away, like with the disbandment of the Scorpions (Directorate of Special Operations in the National Prosecuting Authority) by

legislation in January 2009, and the December 2024 disbandment of KwaZulu-Natal's Political Killings Task Team (PKKT). Specialised agencies 'can have some impact but are not the solution to corruption within a country' (Fukuyama and Recanatini 2018, 58), particularly in highly corrupt environments with strong incentives among vested elite to stall, delay, undo and reverse reform.

Contemporary pockets of effectiveness/islands of integrity (POEs and ISI) are criticised for reproducing the 'notion of an elite bureaucratic caste introduced under colonial rule as much as any commitment to building a rational-legal order' (Hickey and Pruce 2023, 19). Expatriates serving in the far-flung colonies of the Empire, anthropologists remind, 'expected an all-inclusive package with official residences, personnel, and foreign allowances' ((Bierschenk 2010, cited in Hickey and Pruce 2023, 19). 'Numerous studies emphasize that such agencies [POEs] thrive on an elitist sense of otherness in relation to the rest of the civil service, a status underwritten by higher rates of remuneration, better conditions of service, and parallel processes of hiring and promotion' (Hickey and Pruce 2023, 19).

Section Five: Political economy and political opportunity analyses meet, nationally and internationally

Adam: *A Practitioner's Encounter of Corruption: A Passage from Apartheid to Post-Apartheid Corruption*

Reflecting on close to thirty years of government employment, Adam, in his practitioner essay writes:

I have come to appreciate that corruption does not define the state. It is the predictable consequence of insulated administrative, coercive, and political power, particularly when inequality is normalised. Corruption emerges when these powers become concentrated, unaccountable, and permanent.

Like several contributors in this Special Issue, Adam contends that compliance-driven anti-corruption reforms have failed to alter the underlying incentives and power relations sustaining corruption. While Khan and Scholtz register Mettler's alarming concern over the failure of tightened governance measures, disciplinary actions, and civil and criminal proceedings for not sending 'strong messages that wrongful acts and behaviour is under scrutiny', Adam argues:

This arsenal and regime are simply not working to stem the tide of corruption, as they are either ignored or loopholes are mined for legal corruption through opaque administrative actions and self-serving bureaucracies enabled by short-term enrichment, especially in the property sector.

Adam writes that corruption arises from irregular appointments that are 'undermining social justice that democratised [post-apartheid] administrations are compelled to deliver in spatial and development plans'.

Consequently, public resources are squandered, and communities become victims of haphazard and chaotic spatial decisions of municipalities. This is a national problem and when combined with weak land use control, results in formal and informal settlements found on land prone to environmental disasters and residents fall prey to extra-judicial and violent rent-seekers.

Adam's most scathing comments are reserved for officials in the building plans and land use application unit of municipalities.

Officials carry approval stamps and certificates of compliance in their private vehicles. Once a plan is registered on the system, these officials effectively bypass it, issuing their own approvals for fees for as low as R5000 to unknown numbers for larger-scale projects. In Tshwane, there are buildings with legal authorisations that do not comply with the zoning of the property or the building regulations, creating structural safety concerns for the occupants, liability considerations, and revenue loss for the municipality.

In the absence of reforms to equalise power imbalances in spatial plans, development planning, and public policy, outcomes, Adams reminds, 'will continue to be subverted and corrupted at the behest, instruction, and financing by those with influence' and undue influence, formal and informal, legal and illegal, licit and illicit (see Khan and Scholtz).

Moloi and Kolevsohn: *From Proposal to Practice: The Evolution of the International Anti-Corruption Court Campaign*

Today's dominant pattern of statecraft primarily serves rich bankers, tax dodgers, foreign tycoons, and kleptocrats who live in a separate world from ordinary citizens with different rules and heavily twisted institutions. Kleptocrats treat public funds as personal property; embezzle, bribe and launder money at an unprecedented scale; capture the media, police and courts to maintain power and evade justice. Their grand corruption fuels poverty, conflict and human rights violations. The International Anti-Corruption Court (IACCourt) is a proposed new international tribunal designed specifically to tackle the impunity of kleptocrats. Although 186 countries have signed the United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003), local courts are often unable or unwilling to prosecute their own leaders. No international court currently has a mandate to prosecute high-level corruption. The International Criminal Court deals with crimes like

genocide, not corruption. Kleptocrats and their enablers (lawyers, bankers) operate across borders, hiding stolen assets in international financial centres. A global court offers a politically neutral forum for prosecution and asset recovery.

In a practitioner essay, Moloi and Kolevsohn trace the evolution of the initiative to establish the IACCourt as a response to persistent gaps in the global enforcement of anti-corruption. Drawing on an interview with Justice Richard Goldstone, Chair Emeritus of the IACCourt Treaty Committee, together with analysis of the evolving treaty development process, the paper maps the evolution of the proposal through engagement with governments, legal experts and civil society. Successive iterations of the treaty for the proposed court have negotiated thorny matters pertaining to sovereignty, political legitimacy, complementarity, selective international justice and enforcement. Attention is devoted to the Court's expanding focus on asset recovery, professional enablers and African participation in the development of the treaty as mechanisms to strengthen legitimacy and enhance effectiveness. The significance of the IACCourt, argue Moloi and Kolevsohn, is its proposed jurisdiction fashioned through inclusive consultation and institutional learning. Sustainable international accountability depends, they claim, upon credible institutions, political legitimacy and broad civil society ownership.

Conclusion

Anti-corruption reforms fail due to their inability to reallocate power and discipline entrenched local actors. For Khan and Patel, a corrupt narrow elite defending wealth, opposed to redistribution, and bent on reproducing inequality has captured the state and derailed social justice. For Mohamed, corruption and state capture are symptoms of a broader extractive political and economic system rather the cause of economic decline. Hermanus contests the mainstream binary state capture scholarship (captured versus uncaptured state), alerting instead to its emergence, recession and reconfiguration whose identification is not reliant on a 'tome of legal evidence of grand corruption'.

The papers by Kolevsohn and Martin, Chivandire and Saruchera and Kariuki move away from the fixation of anti-corruption reform on enactment and enforcement to how corruption is constructed, experienced and contested within everyday social life, summoning interventions to shift public meanings, norms and identities, not just laws and sanctions. However, there are 'very few examples of rigorously tested social norms anti-corruption interventions happening in real-world settings and involving the expected beneficiaries' (Kubbe, Camargo and Scharbatke-Church 2024, 435); interventions and outcomes are not easily connected or connected at all (White and Muturi 2023); and the sustainability of interventions is a legitimate concern. Moreover, beyond describing the mechanisms and instances where local norms incentivise and fuel corruption, there is little evidence, as to what works in contexts, like South Africa, of entrenched forms of corruption where it is 'embedded in wider social and cultural practices and understandings' (Camargo 2022, 05). Over and above being a 'teleological trap' is the 'large simplification' (Torsello 2014, 13) in the social norms literature that pays no heed to the 'nature, characteristics, patterns and organisational structure' of corruption (Sissener 2001, 01).

Social behavioural change communication betrays a naïve, but strategic, ignorance of bureaucracies tied mainly to the myopic edict and verdict of official organograms and deviation from Weberian norms. Everywhere, the 'core component' of bureaucracies includes 'conflict, negotiations, alliances and power relations' (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, 01). In contrast to shallow and hollowed out bureaucracies marching to the drum beat of disembodied official norms, anthropologists remind of 'several ideal types of bureaucracy and not just one'; every 'concrete bureaucracy deviates from its ideal type'; official norms co-occur with different practical norms; each state profession has its own bureaucratic organisation; and that 'sedimentation of distinct bureaucratic procedures is the rule rather than exception' (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, 23). In sum, bureaucracies, 'at work', dialectically combine 'formal organisation and real practice, and official regulation and informal norms' (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, 01)—they are 'complex multi-regulatory landscapes' comprising 'a multiplicity of sources of norms'; systems of laws and regulations are 'layered'; legal terms that are not strictly defined; and rapidly changing legal contexts that must be negotiated (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, 09).

Anti-corruption reformers display 'serious ignorance of the situations that they claim to be reforming' (Blundo, Olivier de Sardan, Arifari and Alou 2006, 06). Disturbingly, and by no stretch of fact, the defining feature of mainstream approaches to combatting corruption is its colonial overreach and imperial impulses gravitating around 'forcing' (Smart and Zerilli 2014, 223) Western rational-bureaucratic organisation, cultural categories and jurisprudence on the 'Other' typified by 'deviation from an ideal or norm' (Anders and Nuijten 2008, 07). Public office-, public interest- and market-centered definitions of corruption confront the same problem as legal or moral definitions of corruption—indifference to different social and moral norms (Sissener 2001)—and are therefore, 'not viable alternative' (Anders and Nuijten 2007, 07).

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Oligarchy, Corruption and Social Justice

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Abstract

South Africa is the ‘most extreme example of an extractive economy in the modern world’, dominated by ‘one of the most concentrated oligarchies in the world’ (Duigan 2026, 6, 4). Resource dependency, the structure of the market, monopolistic control and barriers to inclusive growth permits capture of the bulk of the economic surplus by a small clique of business elites and politicians *before* any government interventions occur. Social grants, free basic services, public spending programmes and progressive taxation does not change this pre-distribution, because the state and big capital are joint wardens of the core strategic sectors of the economy—mining, banking, and agribusiness—locking out the majority from formal sector employment. An underappreciated problem in South Africa’s political economy, oligarchic rule, the politics of the defence of wealth, is tracking a global trend of entrenching and deepening inequality. Rising inequality is everywhere degrading democratic institutions, eroding trust in government and hastening the political disengagement of the poor. This, in turn, is increasing the ability of the superrich to dominate policymaking, warping policies, institutions, and governance towards greater inequality. Again, South Africa is no exception. This paper interrogates corruption through the nexus of inequality, democratic backsliding and state capture as manifestation of oligarchic rule. Front centring social justice, the paper appeals for a re-orientation of the mainstream anti-corruption discourse towards engagement with the politics of the defence of wealth by disrupting the business as usual approach of the ‘most corrupt private sector in the world’ (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2020, 8) and limiting the undue influence of private money in politics.

Keywords: social justice, inequality, democratic backsliding, oligarchy, state capture

1. Introduction

Corruption stems from ‘deep-rooted conflicts between the power of those who rule and the claims of those who do not’ (Seepe 2001). For Lumumba-Kasongo, a fellow at the University of Stellenbosch’s prestigious Institute for Advanced Study, because corruption is about social development, it ‘*must* be addressed philosophically and structurally’ and ‘*must* address social justice’ (cited in Galloway 2018, added emphasis). Restraining the undue influence of power is what renders ‘controlling and combatting corruption a compelling concern in the first place’ (Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 8).

In South Africa (SA), addressing corruption structurally is of crucial importance, because elite entanglement and collusion, firstly, locks the majority out of formal sector employment. Secondly, corruption in the private sector is the worst in the world—13 per cent above the global average (PwC 2020, 8)—outsizing the corruption in the public sector (Bond 2024; Marchant and Dilrajh 2025). Thirdly, dismantling the power imbalances enabling the oligarchs (minority) to ‘abuse power and exploit’ (Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 21) the majority, is a prerequisite for repurposing and retooling institutions for social justice.

The power imbalances inscribed in SA’s stubborn and persistent structural, racial and spatial inequality yields a 31 per cent risk of democratic backsliding—the erosion of rights and political freedom (Rau and Stokes 2025)—compared to 8.4 per cent in the inegalitarian United States of America (USA) and 4 per cent in the relatively egalitarian Sweden (Maitland et al. 2026, 26).¹ SA’s pre-tax Gini coefficient was pegged at 0.8 in 2019, unchanged from 1993, with the top 10 per cent of earners capturing 70 per cent of the total national income, ‘position[ing] South Africa as the most unequal country in the world on comparable pre-tax metrics’ (Duigan 2026, 6).

The disillusionment with democracy in SA is evidenced in low voter turnouts, the breakdown of trust in public institutions, particularly

¹ Democratic backsliding is calculated using a statistical model linking the Gini coefficient—a measure of income inequality—to the probability of democratic erosion (see Rau and Stokes 2025; Maitland et al. 2026 for a full discussion). Democratic backsliding includes undermining checks and balances of the legislature and judiciary, restricting civil liberties, manipulating elections, and normalising authoritarian practices.



local government, and political disengagement of the poor and unemployed youth. The disillusionment, erosion and disengagement are both cause and symptom of oligarchic rule. Elites in mining, finance and agri-business have given senior African National Congress (ANC) leaders skin in the game, and have colluded to capture the state, subvert democracy, derail social justice and entrench inequality further (Naudé 2024, 2025).

State capture, the ‘historical manifestation’ (Sebake 2017) of and a ‘synonym for’ (Stoyanov 2018, 170) oligarchic rule refers to the ‘behaviour of oligarchs manipulating policy formation and even shaping the emerging rules of the game for their own very substantial advantage’ (Hellman, Jones and Kaufmann 2003, 2–3; Hellman and Kaufmann 2004). State capture sketches a scenario wherein predatory elites stray from democracy into a particularistic state, entrenching corruption as a norm and throttling equitable governance (Mungiu-Pippidi 2013), thereby compromising and undermining the constitutional right to social justice (Pillay, Chitunhu and Chivandire 2023).

The post-apartheid political settlement delivered political inclusion but sacrificed social justice (Ngqulunga 2023). Universal franchise was at the expense of the poor majority who now ‘hold fewer assets, have fewer skills, earn lower wages, and are still more likely to be unemployed’ (Scott 2019). Enshrined in the Constitution (RSA 1996), social justice, asserts the Public Protector, is a legally enforceable right encompassing access to basic necessities—housing, healthcare and education (Gcaleka 2024). However, the business sector ‘sees itself above and outside the Constitution’ (Jara 2024), and the social injustice of the political agreement—national reconciliation too—has enlarged the inequality trap preventing upward mobility of the poor but protecting the rich from downward mobility.

The mainstream anti-corruption toolkit of models, norms, regulation, compliance, enforcement and punishment is unfathomably ‘most reluctant to confront power imbalances’ (Johnston and Fritzen 2021, 21) and entrenched power relations (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006). The technocratic framing of corruption depoliticises questions of power, ownership and economic exclusion, detracting and distracting from the undue influence of wealth, power and social status on ‘who gets what, when, how’ (Laswell 1936). In highly unequal societies, this technocratic framing reduces anti-corruption reform to the management of symptoms, not structural conditions—the historic compromises and the business as usual orientation of corporates (discussed in Section Five)—sustaining both inequality and corruption.

Fear of compromising ‘economic stability’ (Hirsch 2015) made ANC leaders reluctant to rewrite the terms and conditions of ‘who gets what, when, how’ in the years 1990–1995. The ‘balance of class power, the nature of state and civil society relations, and global configurations’ exerted pressure on ANC’s leaders to adopt conservative economic policies (Habib 2013, 24). ‘Economic stability’—the ‘indispensable rhetoric’ of oligarchy to legitimise and perpetuate structural inequality (Fletcher 2025)—ruled out a ‘more radical’ redistribution of assets and wealth; restricted the mandate of the Reserve Bank—which enjoys the ‘highest form of independence than any central bank in world’ (Hickel 2021, 62)—to financial stability and protecting the currency, ‘not full employment’; focussed competition policy on anti-competitive behaviour and ‘not attacking oligopolistic structure’; frustrated the introduction of a ‘more vigorous industrial policy’; and railroaded ‘more urgently’ transforming the apartheid urban morphology (Hirsch 2015). Six years later, Alan Hirsch, the same economist who endorsed and justified these ‘neoliberal compromises’—when working as the head and deputy head of economic policy in Mbeki’s presidential office (Bond 2016 critiquing Hirsch 2005, 2015)—writes: ‘To find a path to dynamic growth, South Africa would have to dismantle [these] historic compromises’ (Hirsch 2020, 16).

Before proceeding to the structure of the paper, a brief note on methodology. Academic studies on corruption ‘should be read in concert’ with works written by journalists, specialised watchdogs, law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGO) (Open Secrets) and social movements (amandla.mobi), because abstract academic frames of reference tend to exclude the ‘daily nitty-gritty struggles’ and the ‘story behind the story’ (Tomaselli 2021, 1). The NGO Open Secrets—not funded by government nor corporates—investigates and exposes corporations, banks and private individuals complicit in war profiteering, state capture and welfare corruption (Marchant and Dilrajh 2025; Marchant et al. 2022). The civil society advocacy platform—amandla.mobi—a one-million strong social movement, harnesses mobile connectivity to restrict industry interference in government decision-making. Amadla.mobi is also not funded by the state nor business.

This paper brings anti-corruption debates in academia (peer-reviewed literature) into conversation with the public lingua franca of NGOs, trade unions, social movements and civil society battling the undue influence of big capital and ANC leaders—with footholds in strategic economic sectors—in politics. Bonanza profits, even when economic growth rates tank, idle money, the export of critical minerals for domestic industry and unprecedented capital flight stands alongside mass poverty, unemployment and inequality. South Africa’s ‘unfinished project’—the construction of effective institutions for social justice (Bradlow 2017)—is ensnared by a narrow elite whose politics defends the pre-distribution of wealth, opposes redistribution and is bent on maintaining and reproducing inequality, like

oligarchs the world over (Tabachnick and Koivukoski 2011; Winters 2026). The statement issued by the South African Communist Party on the 28th anniversary of the 1994 democratic breakthrough bears testimony to this.

[While] members of the South Africa's oligarchy wallow in whopping amounts of amounts of monumental wealth, they intransigently deprive the workers and the downtrodden in the economy of any notable improvements [in their lives], deepening the crisis levels of mass poverty, unemployment and social reproduction (2022, added emphasis).

Today, unequal social outcomes indexed to life expectancy, infant and child mortality, educational attainment and access to services across social groups is fuelling social protest (De Juan and Wegner 2019).

This paper is divided into four Sections. Section Two addresses the modern drivers of state capture, namely rising inequality, democratic backsliding and oligarchic rule. Section Three turns to the poor as an afterthought in the National Democratic Revolution. Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) benefitted white corporates more than Black business, with large capital retaining concentrated economic control. BEE entangled the economic and political elite, turning many ANC politicians into the allies of economic oligarchy. Section Four focusses on elite interdependency and the related exclusion of the majority from the formal economy, which together with government's programme of welfarism leaves intact and exacerbates inequality and poverty. Section Five queries whether the weighty and authoritative state capture scholarship furnishes clues for the construction of effective institutions for social justice, because little has shifted in the balance of ownership and power since democratic rule (Marchant and Dilrajh 2025). Anti-corruption reform, the Conclusion argues, *must* engage with wealth defending wealth including dismantling historic compromises, disrupting business as usual, and widening the market for influence for the construction of effective institutions to deliver social justice.

2. Inequality, democratic backsliding, and the state capture nexus

Corruption cannot be understood in isolation from inequality, the erosion of rights and political freedoms, and the oligarchization of political power. In this context, wealth is defended by a small powerful clique dominating the politico-economic systems who warp institutions, and craft policies serving their private interests (Vartavarian 2024). The construction of guardrails around key institutions and policies encases the market, while the particularistic distribution of economic resources works to defend wealth.

Inequality, democratic backsliding and state capture—an 'extreme form' of legal corruption effected via campaign finance, lobbying, favours to politicians, regulators, and officials (Kaufman, 2012)—are inextricably linked. Inequality diminishes citizens' trust in institutions, politically polarises, and reduces political engagement among 'less affluent citizens' (Stiglitz et al. 2025, 22). Rising inequality, in turn, increases the 'ability of wealthy elites to dominate policymaking and capture democratic institutions' (Maitland et al. 2026, 27). Data from 136 countries reveals that as economic resources become more unequally distributed, so too does political power, leading to policy outcomes reflecting the preferences and interests of upper-income over those of lower-income groups (Stiglitz et al. 2025, 30). The correlation between inequality, a political choice (Mohamed 2024), and state capture (elite domination of policymaking) has curiously not found traction in SA's state capture scholarship.

With inequality as one of the strongest predictors of democratic backsliding (Rau and Stokes 2025), rising inequality risks undermining democracy (Houle 2009). Countries with lower inequality or greater egalitarianism exhibit a reduced risk of democratic backsliding than those with high inequality, such as SA with a record high risk of 31 per cent. Widening socioeconomic gaps continue damaging public faith in government institutions and threatens political cohesion (Kotze and Ayodele 2024).

Since 1994, SA has experienced a consistent decline in electoral participation. The 2024 national and provincial elections recorded a voter turnout of 58.64 per cent—the lowest in 30 years of democracy (Hadad 2024). Survey data from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) indicates a persistent decline of trust in political institutions, with only 27 per cent of South Africans expressing confidence in parliament in 2023—a decrease from 58 per cent since 2004 (Roberts 2023). In 2026, interviews with citizens aged 16 and older across the nine provinces found that 'only 17% of voters are satisfied with democracy, while 68% were not' (Shomolekae 2026). The alarmingly low satisfaction index is linked to the erosion of public trust in institutions occasioned by discontent with unemployment and corruption. Heightened perceptions of elite corruption is 'positively correlated with an increase in general and anti-government contention'— social protest (Lewis 2021, 239)—and popular 'disengagement from participatory processes' (Sigsworth 2025, 2).

Inequalities extinguish equality of opportunity and outcome. 'Inequality of opportunity' in SA—measured by the access to quality basic services such as education and healthcare—is 'higher than any other country in the world' (Bittar 2020). An estimation of the inequality of opportunity index and its ratio to overall inequality reveals 'enduring links between life outcomes for a given generation

versus those of the previous generation' (World Bank 2018, 09). The 'high intergenerational elasticity of earnings (low mobility)' is (partly) attributable to differences in the earnings of races across generations associated with and compounded by the 'persistent concentration of the white minority at the top of the earnings distribution' (Narayan, Van der Weide, Cojocaru et al, 2018, 154).

The persistence of these inequalities, even if there is economic growth for everyone, seems to suggest the existence of inequality traps... whereby the various dimensions of inequality (in wealth, power, and social status) interact to protect the rich from downward mobility and to prevent the poor from being upwardly mobile (Narayan, Van der Weide, Cojocaru et al. 2018, 154).

While inequality is 'not good for the economy', 'not good for democracy', 'not good for social cohesion', and 'not good for climate change efforts' (Valodia 2024), it is *not* inevitable. Inequality is a political choice resulting from policies, institutions and governance structures *chosen* by SA's policy-making elite (Mohamed 2024).

If inequality is a political choice, is liberal democracy the vehicle to reduce the risk of backsliding? The answer is no! 'Political power is today de facto oligarchic' (Vergara 2020, 4). Current configurations of global and state power correlate with formations of oligarchic control (Kapferer 2005). For the USA's Senator Bernie Sanders:

Oligarchy is a system in which a small number of extremely wealthy individuals control the economic, political, and media life of a nation. It is a system in which ordinary people have very little power to determine the future of their country. If you're an American, it is the system in which you're living. Increasingly, it is the system that is dominating people in almost every country on Earth (Sanders 2025, 8, added emphasis).

The 'generally oligarchic character of American politics under the Constitution is now true for virtually every nation on earth' (Simpson 2011, 85), that is, wealth, power and social status determine *who* are the rulers, *who* makes economic policy, *who* holds offices of power, and *who* conducts business with the state. 'There is no popular assembly, and the people as such control nothing' (Simpson 2011, 80-81). Oligarchs deploy their wealth and power in political contests to determine *who* is voted and *who* governs by starving candidates of campaign resources (Sanders 2025). In essence, 'oligarchs deploy wealth to defend wealth by utilizing capital to architect public policies to advance their private interests' (Vartavarian 2024).

Since the 1960s, the oligarchs have built a Wealth Defence Industry (WDI) for the 'sole purpose of defeating democratic attempts at redistribution' (Winters 2026a).

Filled with armies of lawyers, lobbyists, accountants, and wealth management professionals, the WDI coordinates oligarch support for candidates, lobbies aggressively for legislation slashing taxes on the rich and corporations, and then, for good measure, creates complex shelters and schemes to make sure almost no taxes are actually paid (Winters 2026a).

With reference to SA, Duigan refers to the WDI as 'institutional oligarchic players'—agents of corporate structures (banks, Chamber of Mines, AgriSA, the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of Southern Africa, the press club, big insurance, retail)—as the 'very narrow slice of society making decisions' (2026, 04).

The pervasiveness of political corruption within a general respect of the rule of law in most liberal representative democracies upends democratic elections as no longer effective to prevent the uninterrupted upward redistribution of social wealth nor to safeguard common welfare. Liberal representative governments are systemically corrupt with political decay manifesting itself as an 'oligarchization of power in society', manipulating the inner workings of the system, not a case of a few 'bad apples' but a 'bad tree' (Vergara 2020, 2). Neoliberal governance has inoculated capitalism, encased it from democracy and dethroned politics—via legislative fiat and institutional design—to partnerships between business and government with the former in the command seat (Slobodian 2018), like SA's infrastructure privatisation and deregulation programme (Duigan 2026). Indispensable to the inoculation and encasement in the USA is the downgrading of economic citizenship by oligarchs through the targeting of organised labour (Vavi 2026), stripping the independence of federal agencies through the appointment of party loyalists rather than career civil servants, and dismantling the 'administrative state by cancelling initiatives and projects that do not match conservative aims' (Townley 2025).

Despite shifts in political rhetoric and factional alignments, SA's political and corporate elites have over successive administrations 'construct[ed] high guardrails around key neoliberal institutions and policies' (Reddy 2025, 20)—Treasury, Reserve Bank and the Presidency. Because dealing with corruption in 'a serious way will collapse the ANC or the state' (interview with member of national trade union office in Von Holdt 2019, 7), guardrails are fortified by corporate financing of the political party and individual enrichment by the appointment and integration of select leaders of the ANC in the core strategic sectors of the economy for stakes in the game and individual

enrichment. Where public goods are distributed on a particularistic basis mirroring the distribution of economic power Mungiu-Pippidi (2006, 87), the anti-corruption strategies favoured, adopted and implemented by the elite is ‘in cooperation with the very predators who control the government and, in some cases also the anti-corruption instruments themselves’ (Fjeldstad and Isaksen 2008, 17; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006).

The next Section apportions blame for the particularistic distribution of economic resources on the ANC’s “progressive nationalism” and the elite entanglement cementing it (Section Four). Thabo Mbeki’s Black capitalism and BEE included the poor but also excluded them, admirably serving economic oligarchy but locking the majority out of the economy.

3. The poor as afterthought in the national democratic revolution

The substance and content of the ANC’s “progressive nationalism” to end racial discrimination and democratic enfranchisement (Ngubengouka 1956) served as ‘hegemonising practice utilised by elite groups’—the same with liberation movements turned government elsewhere in Africa (Soler-Crespo 2019)—to ‘dominate the majority and in the process appropriating economic and political influence’ (Hwami 2016, 27). Mbeki’s BEE programme to remedy racial inequality (Moyer-Duncan 2019) and deracialise apartheid’s patterning of ‘ownership, accumulation and allocation of capital’—via procurement, government restructuring and other state instruments—was to promote a ‘black patriotic bourgeoisie’ (Von Holdt 2023, 23), as the ‘motive force’ of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) (ANC 1998, 3–6), however, ‘in a manner that benefits the poor’ (ANC 1998, 5).

Ironically, two decades earlier, Thabo Mbeki decried Black capitalism as the ‘confirmation of parasitism’—rather than its ‘antithesis’—‘with no redeeming features whatsoever, without any extenuating circumstances to excuse its existence’ (1979). True to word and form, Mbeki’s Black capitalism and BEE included the poor in the NDR, but only as an ‘afterthought’ (Chipkin 2003, 36). The parallel political economy of networked state officials and businesspeople rigging procurement and defrauding the state to reroute government revenue for establishing businesses and fund self-enrichment, emerged during the presidential tenure of both Mandela and Mbeki (Von Holdt 2019).

BEE left white minority ownership of the economy untouched. There was ‘substantial restructuring of capital, without broadening its base’ (Makgetla 2004, 277). The bulk of ownership changed in the 1990s through corporate BEE benefitted white corporates more than Black business (Ponte, Roberts and Van Sittert 2007). Deconglomeration—conglomerates dividing into numerous independent/autonomous units—‘while involving transfers in ownership did not entail large South African capital letting go of concentrated control’ (Isaacs 2018, 245). Rather than dealing a fatal blow to the SA’s oligarchy as envisaged by Mandela and the black nationalists of his era,

BEE struck a fatal blow against the emergence of black entrepreneurship by creating a small class of unproductive, but wealthy, black crony capitalists made up of ANC politicians, some retired and others not, who have become strong allies of the economic oligarchy, that is, ironically, the caretaker of South Africa’s deindustrialisation (M.Mbeki 2009, 61).

As a result, economic policy has faithfully served the economic oligarchy enabling more extraction from the ‘most extreme example of an extractive economy in the modern world’ (Duigan 2026, 6), and accelerating deindustrialisation (HSRC 2021).

4. Elite entanglements, interdependencies, employment and welfare

The entanglement of, and interdependence between SA’s political and economic assumes an ‘oligarchic form’ (Tinel 2026, 15), an ‘underappreciated problem” (Naudé 2025) in SA’s political economy. ANC politicians depend on the private sector for enrichment, and the latter bankrolls the ANC (fortification), admitting key leaders into strategic sectors of the economy. The joint wardens control the commanding heights of the economy to defend wealth, but at colossal socio-economic costs for the majority.

The relationship between big business and the ANC was best captured when Jacob Zuma addressed the 2015 gala dinner of the Progressive Forum—a dialogue and networking platform established in 2006 for the party, small business and corporates with graded membership and access to political power depending on financial contributions to an ANC-controlled coffer (Southall 2018)—reportedly said:

I always say to businesspeople that if you invest in the ANC, you are wise. If you don’t invest in the ANC, your business is in danger... This organisation does not make profit, but we create a conducive environment to those who make profit. Once you make profit, you know what to do (cited in Hunter and Letsoala 2015; Khosa 2015).

In this context, the economic and political elite have ‘failed to deliver either rapid or inclusive economic growth’ (Vartavarian 2024). South Africa is dominated by ‘one of the most concentrated oligarchies in the world’ (Duigan 2026, 4, 6). The volatile commodity price cycles of platinum group metals, gold, manganese and chrome; the structure of the market (core industries are controlled by a few dominant firms); monopolistic control/industry concentration (70 per cent of economic sectors are dominated by a handful of firms holding more than 50 per cent of market share); and high barriers to entry permits the capture of the bulk of the economic surplus by a small elite *before* any government intervention occurs (Duigan 2026, 6–8). The result is ‘a maldeveloped political economy that excludes the majority from formal sector employment’ (Vartavarian 2023, 577), with an oligarchic elite presiding over a highly concentrated economic structure with formidable barriers to entry—the latter ‘fundamentally a matter of legal and political design and ideology, not natural or necessary economics’ (Pasquale 2019, 109).

Corruption is ‘higher in countries dominated by a small number of firms’ (Ades and Di Tella 1996, 08; Southall 2018, 42). Corruption is a “symptom” of new entrants trying to find their way into an economy that excludes them (Friedman 2020). Reducing the powers of monopolies, removing anti-competitive advantages and promoting investment through incentives is deemed necessary for widening the market for influence (Bhorat et al. 2017).

In this low investment, low productivity, low wage and low employment economy (Ashman 2015), the elevation of employment, over ‘handouts’ (social grants and income transfers), leaves unquestioned

....who controls capital (private versus public), who owns capital (foreign versus national), and who controls its distribution (workers or capitalists). When countries are no longer free to grapple with these questions...there is an inevitable slowdown in economic development (Amsden 2008, 3, added emphasis).

Without control over *who* owns, *who* controls, and *who* distributes capital, the ‘programme of welfarism has left in place and even exacerbated features of the economy that produce inequality and poverty in the first place’ (Chipkin 2016, original emphasis).

Because extreme material inequalities accompany extreme political inequalities under oligarchic rule (see Sebake 2017), the next section turns to the political and institutional power underwriting the state capture scholarship in search of clues to construct effective institutions for social justice. The commentary below draws from peer-reviewed material, NGO reports and an array of disciplines searching for clues.

5. Is state capture business as usual?

Corruption is ‘not intrinsic to *black majority rule* but was endemic under *white* colonialism and *white majority rule* too’ (Hain 2025, 2, original emphasis). Current forms of corruption have real roots in corrupt behaviours inherited from the past (Lodge 1998; Friedman 2020). Contemporary state capture in SA reflects long historical patterns of collusion between political and economic power, rather than a uniquely post-apartheid phenomenon. State capture—SA Inc., a corporate project of global capitalism’s extraction and exploitation—dates to the Dutch East India Company (1652–1815), British colonialism (1815–1910), the Union of SA (1910–1948), Volkskapitalisme (Afrikaner capitalism) (1934–48) (O’Meara 1983), to apartheid’s ‘profitable militarised economy’ (1948–1990 De Klerk reforms) (Naudé 2025). The corruption across these centuries dwarfs the post-apartheid elite’s unlawful enterprise (Marchant and Dilrajh 2025).

The undue influence of business over politics and vice versa is ‘nothing new’ in SA’s political economy; the ‘entire modern economy of South Africa is based on undue influence’ (Fakude 2016). This raises broader questions about the relationship between patronage, politics and power wherein ‘politically powerful and well organised social groups, from which clients are drawn, are relatively more powerful and can extract much better bargains from the state [patron]’ (Khan 1996, 18). ‘The poor’, remarked Makgetla in 2004, ‘remain largely excluded from [economic] policy-making processes. In contrast, government officials interact consistently with business’ (07). Almost two decades later, Koketso Moeti, Executive Director and founding member of amandla.mobi remarks:

...we’ve seen big businesses use their power to influence the decision-making processes of government that puts profits before people. We’ve watched them use tactics like bullying and wining and dining to attempt to stop and delay taxes, better wages and cheaper medication. This includes strategies to dilute, delay and delegitimise any regulations, laws or taxes so big businesses can maximise and protect their profits (cited in Amandla.mobi 2022).

Returning to the state capture scholarship. First, SA’s state capture is not exceptional to the continental norm of capture and corruption (Mlambo, Mubecua and Mlambo 2023). Liberation movements turned government in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique and Tanzania, installed a ‘perverse system’ of governance comprising ‘state capture and dubious nepotist activities with white-owned large-

capital' (Soler-Crespo 2019, 30). In the case of South Africa, the continued economic dominance, especially by those 'who ruled in the apartheid regime', is referred to as 'false decolonization' or 'recolonization' (Saul 2015).

Second, the state capture scholarship has, and continues to spotlight only the adverse consequences of systemic corruption rather than both positive and negative effects (Polhmann 2024). 'Corruption is likely to have very *different* effects in different contexts' (Khan 2006, 4, original emphasis). In the period 1967 to 1980, Kenya and Cote d'Ivoire outperformed the economies of Malaysia and Indonesia, respectively (Mkandawire 2001). Rapid growth was accompanied by a shadow state and elite capture in both cases (Winder 1992; Yaya 2024).

Third, even if the state capture scholarship acknowledges SA's long history of both business and politicians co-opting elements of the state for personal enrichment (Van Vuuren 2017)—or the 'original state capture' of the post-apartheid when the political elite was co-opted by the white economic elite during the democratic transition (1990–1994) (Terreblanche 2018) to influence the policies of the post-apartheid government (M. Mbeki cited in Davis 2020)—it fails to grasp 'how patronage networks and anti-democratic tendencies co-exist with more democratic characteristics in countries like South Africa' (Marchant 2018, 47). Indeed, there is a continuum between personalised patronage and impersonal rule-of-law institutions in all countries, fashioned by the co-evolution of political, economic and institutional development. SA is in the middle of the continuum in need of 'good enough governance' for anti-corruption reform versus the economic and political institutions associated with tenets and mantra of 'good governance' (Levy 2017).

Fourth, Zuma and his Radical Economic Transformation (RET) programme did not serve the interests of a 'new black business class in the making' as contended by Bhorat et al. (2017, 6) and Chipkin and Swilling (2018). Political power was deployed to facilitate the enrichment of a single family (Lewis 2024) or the 'select few' (Coetzee 2020, 80).

Fifth, the state capture scholarship is imprecise in distinguishing between legitimate political lobbying; restructuring government agencies and repurposing for private gain; and executive overreach and state capture by public officials (Dassah 2018).

Sixth, Bradlow (2024), a critical urban scholar whose work underscores the dynamic interaction between power from below (social pressure) and above (institutional capacity) in governance, argues that the Bhorat et al. (2017) report betrays a 'naïve view of the state...that state institutions must be captured by one or other sector for state action to achieve a desired goal' (Bradlow 2017).

This is an analytical and political cul-de-sac. Institutional "capture" is both a symptom and a "cause" of the country's democratic crisis, [which] is the result of an unfinished project of remaking institutions first shaped under colonial and apartheid rule...to create a more equitable society. [The] dominant view of the state [is] "naïve" because it treats power as the terrain for narrow manipulation by one group or another. In fact, the crisis shows that South Africa doesn't yet have, and desperately needs, effective institutions with the capacity to respond to broader society (Bradlow 2017).

Seventh, present dominant interpretations of state capture itself and organised crime, as well as their relationship, are deficient in explaining legal and illegal activities at local government level. These activities include using influence to abuse legal mechanisms for individual enrichment, but also the protection of illicit activities through any means, whether administratively or violently. This 'type of organised crime becomes illegal activity and the facilitator of illegal activity' (Sigsworth 2025, 2).

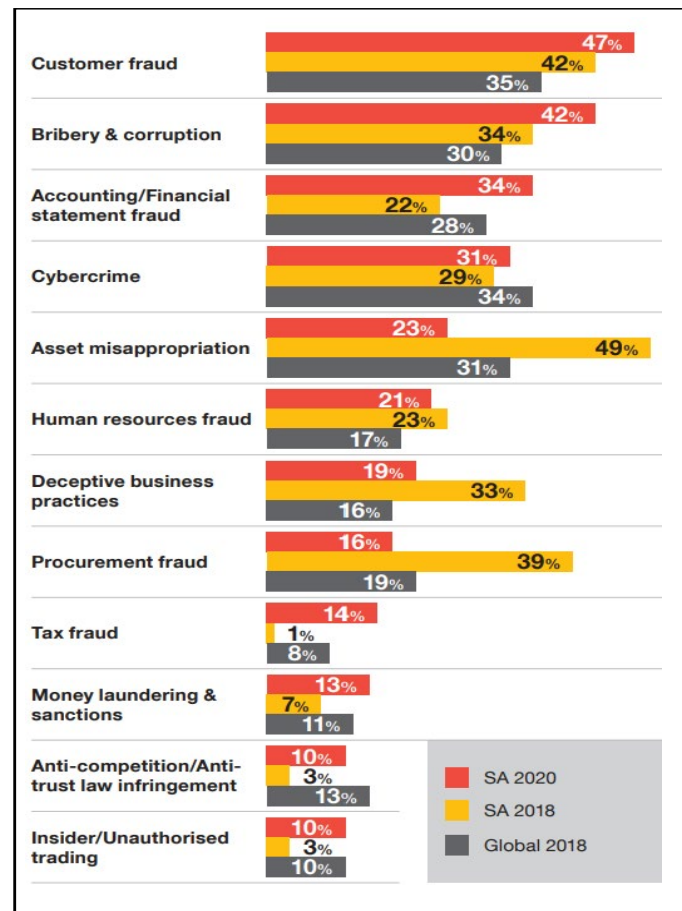
Penultimately, while the original conception of state capture referred to shaping laws, rules and regulations through illicit and non-transparent private payments to public officials, the aspect of 'stalling change' (Chipkin 2016, 7, added emphasis) was missed in local state capture scholarship. Entrenched interests—business lobbies and landowners—have actively resisted equitable redistribution (Ngqambela et al. 2025, 4). '[P]rivate interests have systematically manipulated state institutions to fulfil limited economic and political goals' (Mkhize, Kayembe and Thusi 2025, 49), including large, international companies and other powerful private interests that have secured lucrative government contracts 'either at extortionate rates and/or illegally and then been complicit in efforts to avoid accountability by colluding in the weakening of key state institutions' (Chipkin 2019, 07).

Collusion between internal and external actors is particularly visible in procurement systems and state contracting. Vast shares of the annual tender budget, reports Kenneth Brown, a former Treasury official, are lost to corporate suppliers of goods and services.

Without adding a cent, the government can increase its output by 30-40%. This is where the real leakage in the system actually is... Revelations about the Gupta and Bosasa empires' grasp over vital state organs, politicians, and officials generated estimates of more than R100 billion in damages, but Brown's estimates suggest that state spending transfers more to both white-run corporations and Black Economic Empowerment firms than previously understood, R240 billion annually (as cited in Bond 2019b, 8).

Finally, and most importantly, the state capture scholarship refuses to acknowledge the pervasive nature of corruption in the private sector. In 2018, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), the second-largest professional services network in the world, ranked SA's private sector as the world leader in customer fraud, bribery and corruption, accounting fraud, asset misappropriation, deceptive business practices, procurement fraud and anti-trust law infringement (Figure 2.1).

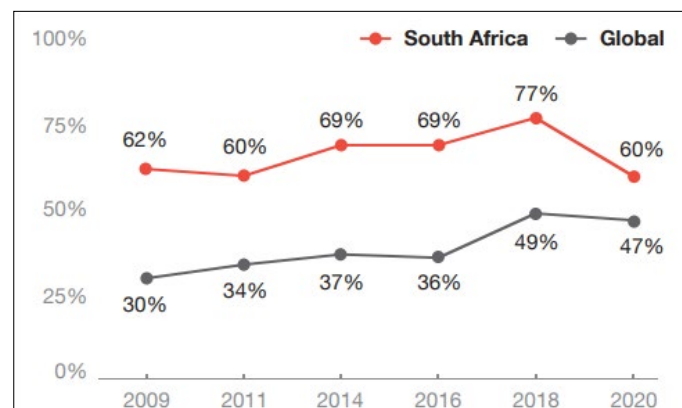
Figure 2.1



Source: PwC, 2020: 10

In 2020, South Africa's rate of reported economic crimes (60 per cent) remains significantly higher than the global average rate of 47 per cent.

Figure 2.2



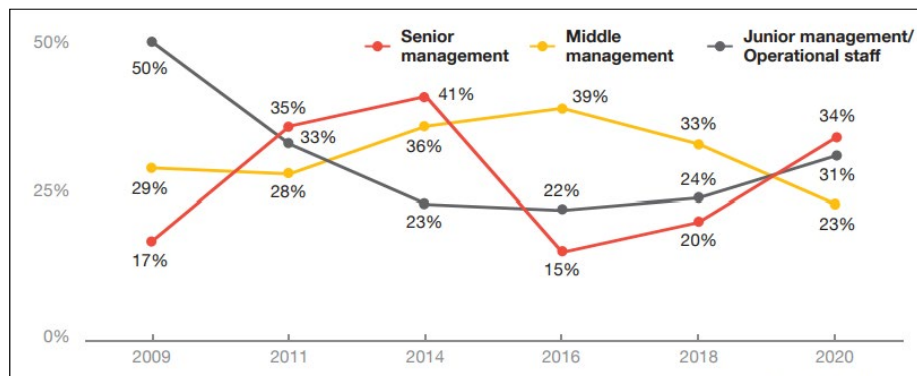
Source: PwC, 2020: 08

With respect to reports of the incidence of crime and actions taken, little action was taken (Figure 2.3) against the internal (41 per cent) perpetrators of economic crime and collusion between internal and external actors (21 per cent) (PwC 2020, 12).

Figure 2.3

Source: PwC 2020: 19

The main perpetrator of internal fraud is senior management (Figure 2.4). Senior management perpetrating economic crimes, doubled from 17 per cent in 2009 to 34 per cent in 2020. This is cause for grave concern, because they ‘are often among the most sinister’, ‘because of the ability (whether through delegated authority levels, system knowledge, or influence) of top executives to override (or conspire to override) internal controls’ (PwC 2020, 12).

Figure 2.4

Source: PwC 2020: 12

The economic crimes confronting SA today result primarily from the failure to dismantle the ‘criminal regimes and corrupt networks’, enabled by a network of politicians, corporate CEOs, arms dealers and ‘smooth-talking fixers’ (Marchant et al. 2022, 14). Private sector corruption, illicit financial flows and collusive relationships between corporations and the political elite is the heart of SA’s corruption crisis. These networks have used their resources and influence to guarantee immunity and to undermine accountability (Van Vuuren and Marchant 2023, 206). The selective nature of accountability in SA raises broader questions about whose forms of corruption are criminalised and whose are normalised or protected, however, the anti-corruption scholarship fails to ask why

Black South Africans are disproportionately represented in the prison population relative to their share of the general population, while the perpetrators of apartheid-era economic crimes—illegal capital flight, the looting of state resources by private corporations, the beneficiaries of forced labour—have not been subjected to criminal accountability (Modisane 2026, 17).

6. Conclusion

The political settlement literature advises that in contexts of widespread rule-violation, high-impact anti-corruption strategies are ‘only likely to be feasible if they align with the interests and capabilities of powerful [rule-abiding] organisations’ supporting rule enforcement (Khan, Andreoni and Roy 2016, 1). However, SA’s rule-abiding elite is thin on the ground, sustained by a ‘culture of impunity wherein corruption is viewed as a consequence-free means to maintain power and influence’ (HSRC 2024, 163). The immunity and impunity derive from the ‘deeper and more pervasive strain’ of corruption in the corporate economy and the ‘relatively minor corruption’ in the public sector (Bond 2024, 35). Recalling the distinction between ‘bad apples’ and the ‘bad tree’, it is ‘unhelpful to see the problem [of state capture] as that of [a] few rogue executives’ (Marchant cited in Smit 2022, added emphasis).

Mainstream anti-corruption approaches are most reluctant to confront the elite who have captured the state and are capturing democracy. The erosion of rights and freedoms wrought by corruption is the staple diet of the mainstream approaches, but inequality and rising inequality are absent. The mainstream obsesses about the relatively minor corruption in the public sector, but steers clear of the wheeling and dealings of the most corrupt corporate sector in the world. The defence of wealth via preventing the poor from upward mobility, the encasement of the market, selective individual enrichment, the exclusion of the majority from the formal economy and undisturbed economic path dependency do not ping on the mainstream anti-corruption reform radar.

Disrupting the business as usual oligarchic rule via taxation on bonanza profits—even when the economic growth rate tanks—restricting capital outflows and curbing the export of critical minerals for domestic industry, contends Naudé (2024), are the ‘first steps’ in realigning the interests of the corporations with the welfare of South African citizens. Reducing the powers of monopolies, removing anti-competitive advantages, and promoting investment through incentives is deemed necessary for widening the market for influence. ‘Greater investment in public services is impossible’, writes Moeti of amandla.mobi, ‘without limiting the influence of private money in politics’ (2025) together with ending immunity and impunity.

Dismantling historic compromises, disrupting oligarchic rule, limiting the influence of private money in politics and stemming immunity and impunity is central to building effective institutions to deliver social justice; central to expanding citizenship via greater investment in public services; central to guaranteeing citizens a minimal floor of constitutionally enshrined rights denied by the Constitution’s liberal doctrines of ‘reasonableness and progressive realisation’ (Modisane 2026, 3); and central to repairing and restoring the profound disconnect between society and state, and society and market.

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Corruption and Human Rights Violations: The Role of Local Government in Curbing Corruption and Its Effects on Citizens' Access to Rights

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Abstract

Local government—the sphere closest to people—is constitutionally mandated to realise human rights through essential service delivery. Yet persistent corruption, weak internal controls and institutional capture systematically divert public resources, entrench inequality, and erode the rule of law. This article examines the relationship between corruption in local government and the violation of human rights in South Africa and asks how local integrity systems can mitigate these effects. Drawing on a comparative case study of the Midvaal and Madibeng Local Municipalities, it demonstrates that robust integrity systems function as human rights infrastructure. Midvaal Local Municipality, operating as a positive outlier and symbolic beacon within a dysfunctional municipal landscape, shows that integrated anti-corruption and rights frameworks produce measurable improvements in rights outcomes, while Madibeng Local Municipality illustrates the causal pathways through which corruption translates into concrete rights violations. The article argues that anti-corruption and human rights agendas are mutually reinforcing and must be pursued together.

Keywords: local government, corruption, human rights, integrity systems, South Africa

1. Introduction

In South Africa, local government is constitutionally mandated to realise human rights through the delivery of essential services (Jam, Bayat and Rulashe 2024). This responsibility is grounded in the founding values of human dignity, equality and the advancement of rights, which must be achieved through inclusive governance that prioritises transparency and accountability. However, the growing number of poorly performing municipalities and the sustained increase in service delivery protests signal significant structural failures (Mamokhere 2023). Rather than serving the public, local government is frequently undermined by corrupt and politically connected officials who divert state resources away from critical services (Mabebe 2021).

Corruption and human rights have historically been treated as separate scholarly domains. Anti-corruption scholars focus on institutional design and financial transparency (Rose-Ackerman and Truex 2013), while human rights scholars concentrate on civil and political liberties. However, the two are intrinsically connected. Corruption undermines rights by diverting resources from communities. Human rights violations, in turn, create environments where corruption flourishes by weakening the rule of law and accountability mechanisms (Peters 2015; Mathiba 2021). This nexus is most visible at local government level, where municipalities bear direct responsibility for water, sanitation, housing and primary healthcare (Ngumbela 2023).

This article addresses the following research question: *How does corruption in local government affect the realisation of human rights in South Africa, and how can local integrity systems mitigate these effects?* It aims to fill a gap in literature on the systematic integration of anti-corruption and human rights frameworks at the local government level.

The study adopts a comparative case study design focussed on two Category B municipalities operating within the same constitutional and fiscal framework. Despite these shared institutional conditions, the municipalities display markedly different governance outcomes. The comparative design follows a “most similar systems” logic in which both municipalities operate within the same legislative and intergovernmental framework but produce contrasting governance and rights outcomes. This enables institutional design, accountability mechanisms and political commitment to be isolated analytically as key explanatory variables. Midvaal Local Municipality—recognised for consistent clean audits, strong financial management, a Memorandum of Understanding with the South African Human Rights



Commission (SAHRC), and an adopted Integrity Management Strategy—is positioned as a positive outlier and symbolic beacon—a rare institutional configuration in which integrity systems and human rights frameworks reinforce one another. Madibeng Local Municipality, characterised by persistent audit failures, organised corruption and documented rights violations, including discriminatory land-lease practices, illustrates the more typical pattern of systemic municipal failure. Data was drawn from Auditor-General reports, SAHRC investigations, municipal policy documents, civil society analyses, and media reporting, and analysed thematically, with the Madibeng corruption–rights pathways presented as a structured narrative of causal sequences, focussed on participation, accountability, non-discrimination and rights outcomes.

2. Human rights, corruption, and local government: A conceptual framework

Human rights are understood here through three complementary lenses. Legally, they are inalienable entitlements codified in international instruments—including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—and domestically in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which places a fourfold duty on the state to respect, protect, promote and fulfil these rights (Mathiba 2021; Moyo 2021). Normatively, human rights establish the equal worth of persons and provide the benchmark for evaluating state conduct (Mathiba 2021, 14). Practically, they are defined by the lived experiences of citizens as they encounter the state through service delivery, public participation and access to justice (Patel 2019).

From a governance perspective, human rights constitute the foundational purpose of the state. Social contract theory holds that state power is legitimate only insofar as it safeguards dignity and rights (Kumm 2018). When officials engage in corruption—distorting public decision-making or diverting resources—the state breaches this contract and undermines its own authority (Mkhize and Nel-Sanders 2025). These effects are cyclical. Corruption erodes public trust and participation, reduces municipal revenue, constrains service delivery and creates conditions for further extraction.

South Africa's constitutional order further deepens this relationship through the principle of transformative constitutionalism, which conceives the Constitution not merely as a framework for limiting state power, but as an instrument for restructuring deeply unequal social and economic relations inherited from apartheid. Within this framework, local government occupies a uniquely important position, because municipalities are expected to advance substantive equality through developmental governance, spatial redress, participatory democracy and equitable service delivery. Corruption, therefore, represents more than administrative inefficiency or financial misconduct. It actively obstructs the transformative project embedded within the Constitution itself. When public officials divert resources intended for housing, sanitation, infrastructure or local economic development, corruption reproduces historical exclusion and entrenches structural inequality. In this sense, corruption undermines not only individual socio-economic rights, but also the constitutional aspiration to build a more just and inclusive society. The constitutional duties imposed on municipalities under sections 152 and 153—including the promotion of social and economic development and the encouragement of community participation—thus position anti-corruption governance as a prerequisite for constitutional transformation rather than a parallel governance concern. These constitutional obligations provide the analytical basis for the comparative case analysis that follows. Rather than treating corruption as a problem of administrative failure alone, the article examines how differing levels of institutional integrity shape municipalities' ability to fulfil their constitutional duties to promote participation, advance social and economic development and realise fundamental rights.

A rights-based framework transforms social needs into enforceable legal claims and repositions citizens from passive beneficiaries into active rights-holders (Boulos and La Barbera 2022). Section 7(2) of the Constitution obligates the state to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the Bill of Rights. Section 195 requires efficient, effective and ethical public administration. Corruption directly undermines both constitutional obligations (Fourie and Malan 2022). Human rights simultaneously function as a check on power. Freedom of expression enables investigative journalism and whistleblowing; freedom of association permits civil society mobilisation; and access to information enables scrutiny of procurement and budgeting (Muslim and Mais 2023). Together, these rights constitute the ecosystem within which corruption can be contested.

Framing corruption through a human rights lens clarifies its broader social and constitutional consequences. First, it violates the right to equality and non-discrimination when access to public housing or services is conditioned on bribes, distributing state resources by proximity to power rather than need (Peters 2015). Second, it directly undermines socio-economic rights. Every misappropriated Rand (South African currency) reduces the state's capacity to deliver healthcare, education, water and sanitation. Third, it corrodes civil and political rights by distorting the rule of law, compromising judicial impartiality and denying citizens equal access to public life (Sancin 2021).

Local government occupies a pivotal position within this nexus. It is simultaneously the most corruption-vulnerable sphere of government and the sphere most directly responsible for the realisation of socio-economic rights (Edoun, Rameetse and Pooe 2023). Decentralisation has transferred extensive responsibilities to municipalities without commensurate institutional capacity, creating opportunities for procurement irregularities and embezzlement (Shah and Thompson 2004). Face-to-face service delivery interactions expose citizens to petty bribery and extortion, while close-knit community networks blur the boundaries between public duty and private obligation (Barr, Lindelöw and Serneels 2009). Consolidated reports from the Auditor-General of South Africa document the scale of the problem. Hundreds of municipalities record irregular expenditure, unauthorised expenditure and material findings annually on financial statements, with a significant proportion receiving disclaimed or adverse audit opinions (Auditor-General South Africa 2025). The SAHRC has simultaneously documented how these fiscal failures translate into violations of the rights to water, housing, healthcare and equal treatment, confirming that what auditors record as financial mismanagement is experienced by citizens as the denial of constitutional rights (SAHRC 2022). Yet local government's same proximity to communities enables participatory mechanisms—public hearings, ward committees, participatory budgeting within the Integrated Development Plan—that are structurally impossible to replicate at national level, and its failures are immediately experienced by residents, creating conditions for mobilisation and oversight (Boufounou et al. 2024; Msenge and Nzewi 2021).

The developmental local government model adopted in post-apartheid South Africa further intensifies the significance of municipal governance in the rights-realisation process. Municipalities are not merely administrative units implementing national policy, they are constitutionally mandated developmental actors tasked with improving community quality of life through participatory, responsive governance and instruments such as the Integrated Development Plan. However, where corruption infiltrates procurement systems, planning processes or political appointments, the developmental mandate of local government becomes distorted. Resources are redirected away from public needs toward private accumulation, public participation becomes performative rather than substantive, and communities lose trust in formal democratic institutions. The resulting governance failures disproportionately affect poor and marginalised communities that rely most heavily on public services and possess the fewest private alternatives. Corruption at the municipal level, therefore, functions as a mechanism through which structural inequality is reproduced across generations.

This article advances the conceptual proposition that a robust local integrity system—understood, following Transparency International's National Integrity System (NIS) model, as a set of interdependent institutional pillars comprising the municipal council, executive, administration, internal audit, civil society, media and citizens (Fourie and Malan 2022)—constitutes human rights infrastructure. This synthesis integrates integrity-system theory with the core principles of the human rights-based approach—participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment and linkage to law (Golub 2020; De Man 2022; Rispoli and Vannucci 2025). Participation functions as both a fundamental right and a structural safeguard. Genuine citizen engagement improves transparency and exposes irregularities before they compound. Accountability operates on two levels—empowering citizens as active rights-holders to challenge duty-bearers, and equipping oversight institutions with clear normative benchmarks. Non-discrimination is directly undermined by corruption, which distributes public resources by political connection, rather than need. Empowerment equips communities with the knowledge and legal standing to resist corrupt demands and claim entitlements. Linkage to law transforms reform from a managerial exercise into a constitutional mandate. When these five principles are embedded within functioning institutional pillars, anti-corruption ceases to be a technocratic exercise and becomes a constitutive condition for the realisation of rights.

The NIS model is not applied uncritically here; it is used cautiously, given critiques that it can become a broad institutional checklist and may under-theorise power, capture and political economy (Brown and Heinrich 2017). The same volume documents cases in which anti-corruption institutions were themselves redirected for political ends, formally performing their oversight function while being used to advance competing interests. This article proceeds with the NIS model despite these limitations, because its analytical purpose here is comparative and diagnostic rather than predictive: it is used to identify which institutional pillars are present, absent or functioning in each municipality, and to trace how the presence or absence of specific pillars corresponds to differences in rights outcomes. The political economy of capture—why certain pillars fail in Madibeng and hold in Midvaal—is addressed directly through the comparative case analysis that follows, rather than through the NIS model's own internal theorisation.

3. Analysis and findings

The comparative analysis that follows examines how these theoretical relationships manifest in practice through two contrasting municipal governance contexts.

3.1. *Corruption—Rights violation pathways in Madibeng Local Municipality*

Madibeng illustrates four pathways through which corruption undermines human rights, each linked to a distinct dimension of the conceptual framework.

Pathway 1—Non-discrimination and socio-economic rights: Auditor-General reports document ZAR51.4 million in irregular expenditure in the 2020–2021 financial year alone, with persistent audit qualifications across successive years and a pattern of unauthorised expenditure extending over multiple financial cycles. SAHRC findings confirm that this fiscal leakage translates directly into inadequate access to water, sanitation, and housing—services that the Constitution requires the state to progressively realise for all residents. When infrastructure funds are diverted through corrupt procurement, the state fails its constitutional obligation, and the burden falls disproportionately on the most marginalised residents who have no private alternatives. The rights violation is a direct and measurable consequence of the corruption.

Pathway 2—Non-discrimination and equality: The SAHRC’s investigation found discriminatory land allocation practices that excluded Black applicants and fuelled racial tensions (SAHRC 2019). Allocation decisions driven by political networks rather than transparent, needs-based criteria constitute both a corruption failure and a constitutional violation of the right to equality and equitable access to land. In Madibeng, corruption operates as a mechanism of structured racial inequality that actively entrenches historical marginalisation rather than redressing it, inverting the transformative mandate of the post-apartheid constitutional order.

Pathway 3—Accountability and access to justice: Institute of Security Studies (ISS) documentation identifies protection networks that shield implicated officials from disciplinary consequences, while whistleblowers face retaliation (ISS 2023). These dynamics undermine the constitutional right to lawful and procedurally fair administrative action under section 33 of the Constitution and the right to effective remedies. The Promotion of Administrative Justice Act 3 of 2000 guarantees procedurally fair administrative action, however, where oversight collapses and consequences are absent, these guarantees are rendered formal rather than substantive. Rights remain formally recognised, but practically unenforceable—the architecture of accountability exists on paper, while impunity operates in practice.

Pathway 4—Participation: Reports of intimidation against protesting residents create a chilling effect on civic participation. Informal restrictions on expression, assembly and association suppress the scrutiny that would otherwise constrain corrupt conduct. The Integrated Development Plan process, which the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 requires to be participatory, becomes a procedural formality, rather than a genuine mechanism of democratic accountability. When communities are discouraged from participation, the early-warning function of civic oversight weakens, and corruption compounds without correction.

3.2. *The local integrity system in Midvaal Local Municipality*

Midvaal demonstrates that local integrity systems can function as human rights infrastructure when all five institutional pillars operate effectively.

Pillar 1—Political commitment and linkage to law: The Memorandum of Understanding with the SAHRC constitutes an explicit legal and institutional commitment to rights-based governance. Human rights norms are embedded as guiding principles rather than external constraints, institutionalising the linkage to law that the conceptual framework identifies as foundational.

Pillar 2—Accountability through transparent administration: Consistent, clean audit outcomes over successive financial years evidence robust procurement and financial management systems. Transparency reduces opportunities for resource diversion and directly protects both socio-economic rights and participatory rights by ensuring that public funds reach intended beneficiaries. The clean audit outcome represents more than financial compliance. It is institutional evidence that public resources are being directed toward their constitutional purposes rather than diverted through corrupt procurement chains.

Pillar 3—Independent oversight and accountability: Effective internal audit functions, public accounts committees, and the additional horizontal oversight layer provided by the SAHRC monitoring process create multiple accountability checks that no single actor can neutralise. The SAHRC’s oversight role is particularly significant. It transforms human rights compliance from a normative aspiration into a monitored institutional obligation, providing an external reference point against which municipal conduct can be assessed and challenged. Unlike Madibeng, where oversight institutions have been captured or rendered ineffective, these mechanisms in Midvaal produce the deterrence necessary to sustain integrity over time.

Pillar 4—Participation as a right and safeguard: Institutionalised public consultation in budgeting and Integrated Development Plan processes enables community input and monitoring. Participation operates simultaneously as a constitutional right under the Constitution

and as a preventive anti-corruption mechanism, consistent with evidence that genuine citizen engagement exposes irregularities before they compound (Rispoli and Vannucci 2025). In Midvaal, participation is structured, rather than tokenistic. Community members engage meaningfully with budget priorities and service delivery plans, creating an informed public capable of identifying and reporting deviations from stated commitments.

Pillar 5—Consequences and non-discrimination: Unlike Madibeng, integrity breaches in Midvaal trigger disciplinary and corrective responses. The presence of real consequences creates deterrence, restores institutional trust and signals that the municipality's rights commitments are substantive, rather than performative. This pillar is central analytically. Without meaningful consequences, all other pillars—transparency, oversight, participation—operate without enforcement and ultimately collapse into procedural theatre. Midvaal's willingness to act on integrity breaches is the institutional expression of non-discrimination in practice. It affirms that no official is above the law and that public resources belong to all residents equally.

Midvaal's significance extends beyond technical compliance with financial management standards. Its relative success reflects the institutionalisation of a governance culture in which accountability, administrative professionalism and public participation reinforce one another over time. Rather than relying solely on the personal integrity of individual political leaders, the municipality has embedded oversight and compliance mechanisms within routine administrative processes, reducing opportunities for arbitrary decision-making and procurement manipulation. This institutional continuity is particularly significant within the South African local government context, where frequent political instability and cadre-based appointments often undermine long-term governance capacity. Midvaal demonstrates that where merit-based administration, transparent systems and enforceable accountability structures are sustained, municipalities are better positioned to fulfil both developmental and constitutional obligations.

Importantly, stronger governance outcomes also appear to reinforce citizen trust and institutional legitimacy. Public confidence in municipal administration contributes to improved civic cooperation, including greater willingness to participate in consultation processes and to pay for municipal services. The relationship between trust and governance sustainability is critical, because municipalities depend heavily on public compliance and revenue collection to maintain infrastructure and deliver services effectively. While Midvaal should not be romanticised as a universally transferable model—given the substantial socioeconomic differences between the two cases—its experience nevertheless demonstrates that institutional design and political commitment materially shape rights outcomes even within broader environments of systemic governance stress.

These socioeconomic differences are not incidental to the “most similar systems” design and warrant explicit treatment. Midvaal is a smaller, peri-urban municipality in Gauteng with a comparatively affluent, formally employed population and has been governed by the Democratic Alliance; Madibeng is a larger, predominantly rural municipality in North West Province with a poorer, largely informally employed population and has been governed by the African National Congress. Governing party affiliation is, therefore, a plausible independent variable rather than a background condition, and it cannot be fully disentangled from the institutional design differences this article treats as explanatory. Two considerations nevertheless support the article's emphasis on institutional design. First, consolidated Auditor-General reporting shows a wide spread of audit and governance outcomes among municipalities governed by each of South Africa's major parties, which suggests that party affiliation alone is a weak predictor of the pillar-level failures and successes documented here, even though this article does not undertake the systematic cross-municipal analysis that would be required to isolate the size of that effect precisely (Auditor-General South Africa 2025). Second, the mechanisms identified in this article—audit compliance, protection networks shielding officials from consequence, participatory budgeting practice and consequence management for integrity breaches—are administrative and institutional in character rather than direct expressions of party ideology, and each is independently documented in the primary sources (Auditor-General South Africa 2025; ISS 2023; SAHRC 2019, 2021, 2022). The comparison should, therefore, be read as showing that institutional design and political commitment matter within, and not merely alongside, whatever influences governing party and socioeconomic context exert on municipal performance; it does not claim that party and context are irrelevant.

3.3. *Comparative rights outcomes*

Across all four analytical categories, governance design produces measurable differences in rights realisation. On access to water and sanitation, Midvaal consistently meets delivery targets and reports high levels of service reliability, while Madibeng experiences chronic infrastructure failures—burst pipes, reservoir collapses and extended outages—that the SAHRC has linked directly to failures of financial and operational management. On access to housing and land, transparent, criteria-based allocation processes in Midvaal constrain discretionary abuse, while Madibeng's discriminatory land allocations produced constitutional violations confirmed by the SAHRC's

2019 investigative report. On equal treatment, systems-based decision-making in Midvaal constrains bias and patronage. In Madibeng, corruption facilitated documented racial inequality in the distribution of public resources. On participation and access to information, Midvaal proactively publishes budgetary and operational data, enabling meaningful public monitoring through accessible ward-level reporting, while Madibeng residents face barriers to information and documented intimidation when they attempt to participate in governance processes. Finally, levels of public trust and willingness to pay for services are markedly higher in Midvaal, reflecting the social contract that rights-based governance sustains—and which corruption systematically destroys.

These outcomes do not represent incidental variations in municipal performance. They are the measurable product of different institutional configurations operating within the same legal, constitutional and fiscal framework. That both municipalities face the same national legislative requirements, the same anti-corruption statutory framework, and the same intergovernmental fiscal transfer regime makes the divergence between them analytically significant. It isolates institutional design and political commitment—rather than external resources or legal environment—as the primary drivers of differential rights realisation. This does not suggest that institutional design alone determines municipal performance. Historical inequality, fiscal pressures, political instability and uneven administrative capacity continue to shape governance outcomes across South Africa's local government landscape. However, the comparison demonstrates that institutional integrity materially influences whether these pressures are mitigated or compounded.

4. Discussion

The comparative findings substantiate the article's central thesis. A robust local integrity system functions as human rights infrastructure. Midvaal's outcomes are not incidental, they derive from institutional arrangements that systematically integrate transparency, oversight, participation and accountability. As a symbolic beacon, Midvaal demonstrates that improved governance and rights outcomes are achievable within the same national constitutional environment that produces widespread municipal dysfunction.

Its significance lies not in being exceptional, but in being instructive. It demonstrates that institutional design and political commitment can materially affect whether rights are realised or violated.

As set out in Section 3.2, Midvaal's institutionalisation of accountability, administrative professionalism and participatory practice—rather than reliance on individual political leadership—is what allows it to sustain rights-protective governance across electoral and administrative turnover.

Madibeng, conversely, should be understood not simply as a poorly performing municipality, but as an illustrative case of systemic governance failure reflecting broader structural patterns across South Africa's local government landscape. The four corruption-rights pathways identified in Madibeng are not idiosyncratic. They recur across municipalities characterised by weak accountability, captured oversight and absent political commitment to rights. The analytical value of the comparison lies precisely here. Midvaal illuminates what is possible when integrity systems function, while Madibeng reveals the causal mechanisms through which their absence translates into lived rights deprivations.

Three central insights follow. First, anti-corruption and human rights are mutually reinforcing. Transparent systems simultaneously protect fiscal integrity and substantive rights, while rights frameworks empower citizens and institutions to contest corruption. Treating anti-corruption and human rights as separate governance agendas is both analytically limiting and practically counterproductive. Recent international initiatives, including the 2025 guide *Bridging Anti-Corruption and Human Rights Efforts* and the SAHRC's direct engagement with municipal governance, reflect growing recognition of this interdependence. Second, corruption's rights impacts are traceable and measurable, not merely normative. The governance failures documented in Madibeng—inadequate water access, discriminatory land allocation, official impunity and suppressed civic participation—can each be linked to identifiable governance failures through the thematic narrative tracing undertaken in this article. This matters for accountability. Rights violations arising from corruption are not unintended systemic outcomes, but the foreseeable consequences of specific institutional decisions and omissions and should be treated as such in both administrative and legal responses. Third, political commitment must be institutionalised rather than personalised. Midvaal's integrity system does not rest on the character of individual officials. It is embedded in formal agreements, internal systems and organisational culture. Sustainable improvement requires institutional embedding rather than reliance on exceptional leadership that cannot be guaranteed across election cycles.

This institutionalisation is particularly important in contexts characterised by political volatility, factionalism and uneven administrative capacity. Anti-corruption reforms that depend primarily on charismatic leadership or short-term political will are often vulnerable to

reversal after leadership transitions or electoral change. Sustainable integrity systems require routinised accountability mechanisms, professional public administration, protected oversight institutions, and empowered communities capable of maintaining pressure for transparency over time. The Midvaal case suggests that governance resilience emerges not from isolated interventions, but from the cumulative interaction between legal frameworks, institutional culture, citizen participation and credible consequences for misconduct. Strengthening local governance, therefore, requires moving beyond compliance-oriented reform toward the construction of durable accountability ecosystems capable of surviving political turnover and resisting institutional capture.

For local governments, integrating human rights frameworks into integrity strategies is not a compliance burden, but a governance dividend. It strengthens anti-corruption efforts, improves audit outcomes, raises service delivery performance and rebuilds the public trust on which revenue collection depends. For national government, embedding integrity and rights indicators within intergovernmental monitoring and support systems—including the Municipal Infrastructure Support Agent and the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs—is essential to scaling these lessons beyond exceptional cases. For civil society, linking corruption monitoring to measurable rights impacts, strengthens both advocacy campaigns and public interest litigation. For international development partners, dual-focussed programming that integrates integrity systems with rights-based governance offers a coherent, evidence-grounded model of local government reform that moves beyond purely technocratic approaches.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that combating corruption at the local government level is not merely a matter of administrative efficiency, but a fundamental human rights imperative. Through comparative analysis of Midvaal and Madibeng Local Municipalities, it has been demonstrated that corruption systematically undermines citizens' access to water, housing, equal treatment and participation, while robust local integrity systems protect these rights. Midvaal's experience within a broader context of municipal dysfunction demonstrates that the institutional conditions for rights realisation are achievable. Madibeng's experience illustrates the governance and rights consequences that emerge when these systems fail.

The central insight is that effective anti-corruption work at the local level must be designed with explicit human rights objectives. Transparency, accountability, participation and non-discrimination are not optional additions—they are the essential foundations of both anti-corruption governance and constitutional rights fulfilment. When municipalities adopt human rights frameworks, they strengthen their integrity systems. When they combat corruption, they protect rights. The two agendas are not parallel, but inseparable and must be pursued together.

This integrated approach has significance beyond South Africa. In an era of growing institutional distrust and democratic backsliding, the local government level is where citizens encounter the state most directly and where the consequences of governance failure are felt most immediately. Local governments that operate as symbolic beacons—demonstrating in practice that integrity and rights can reinforce one another even within challenging national environments—offer an evidence base for reform that is more persuasive than normative argument alone.

Across the African continent, rapid urbanisation, increasing decentralisation and growing public demands for accountable governance are placing unprecedented pressure on local government institutions. Municipalities increasingly function as the frontline sites at which citizens evaluate the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state itself. In this context, the integration of anti-corruption and human rights frameworks offers a practical and normatively grounded model for strengthening democratic governance at the local level. Aligning integrity systems with rights-based governance also advances broader continental and global commitments, including the African Union's Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goal 16, which emphasise accountable institutions, inclusive governance and access to justice. Municipal governance should, therefore, be understood not merely as an administrative concern, but as a central arena in the struggle for democratic resilience, social justice and sustainable development across Africa. Efforts to combat corruption and advance human rights are therefore inseparable.

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A Heterodox Developmental Economics Understanding of Systemic Corruption: The Case of South Africa

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Abstract

This article applies a heterodox developmental economics framework to understanding corruption and state capture in post-apartheid South Africa. A central insight of heterodox development economics is that developmental states must manage economic rents by disciplining vested interests and directing capital toward productive investment. States unable to discipline large corporations create conditions for extractive, rent-seeking elites, while financial liberalisation and financialisation intensify speculative and rent-seeking behaviour. The article argues that the failure of the post-apartheid government to build a developmental state capable of disciplining corporate power and influencing the allocation of capital contributed both to poor economic performance and to persistent corruption. Large corporations have retained significant control over the economy while investing relatively little in productive domestic development and continuing to extract wealth. At the same time, limited legitimate economic opportunities encouraged sections of an aspiring elite, consisting of politically connected individuals and private business interests, to pursue rents through corruption and state capture within the public sector and state-owned enterprises. The article contends that corruption and state capture in South Africa should not be understood primarily as the cause of economic decline, but rather as symptoms of a broader systemic corruption rooted in an extractive political-economic structure.

Keywords: corruption, development economics, financialisation, heterodox economics, elite power

1. Introduction

Understanding corruption and state capture in South Africa requires consideration of the role of corporate elites, influential politicians and senior public sector officials. Unfortunately, most mainstream economic analysts of corruption and state capture focus on the public sector and miss the bigger picture. The elites of the most powerful corporations have incorporated politically influential Black people in their businesses and boards since the transition from apartheid to democracy. These corporate elites, who now include a small number of politically influential Black people, have huge influence over the government.

Unemployment and inequality have worsened post-apartheid, while large corporations have increased extractive activities (Mohamed 2024). Low levels of reinvestment by the largest corporations have led to deindustrialisation and poor levels of economic activity. At the same time, there are aspiring elites in business, including many white businesspeople, who have struggled to increase market share since the apartheid era, and politically influential people, who have not been absorbed into the corporate elites. Some of these aspirant elites have been willing to use corrupt means to grab a larger share of the South African economic pie. As a result, government departments and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have become contentious sites of corruption and capture by large corporate elites and aspirant elites (Khan and Mohamed 2023).

The failure of the post-apartheid government to pursue the formation of a developmental state that could discipline giant corporations and influence the allocation of capital is at the heart of the problem. The post-apartheid government adopted a neoliberal variant of neoclassical economics (hereafter referred to as neoliberal neoclassical economics), and neoliberal ideology influenced many of its policies. The result has weakened economic development, service delivery, state-owned enterprises and key infrastructure. A mainstream economic and broadly neoliberal perspective has developed within South Africa that blames the poor performance of the South African economy on corruption and state capture. This article will illustrate that poor performance of the economy and corruption, including state capture, are consequences of the failure to implement a developmental state.

The methodology of this paper is the application of a heterodox developmental economics framework to analyse corruption and state capture in post-apartheid South Africa, arguing that both are symptoms of a broader extractive political-economic system shaped by neoliberal governance and the failure to build a developmental state. It uses a secondary analysis that draws on heterodox development economics literature, particularly literature examining the success of the Asian Tigers and less successful experiences in Latin America, and



the role played by a developmental state in managing rents and rent-seeking behaviour. Heterodox economics literature rejects the classical dichotomy of neoclassical economics that separates the real and financial sectors of an economy. In doing so, it challenges mainstream economics perspectives on corruption, which draws on their ideologically inspired neoliberal view of the role of the state. An effort is made to examine how this type of heterodox developmental economics literature discussed corruption and relations between state and business. The methodology used updates the older heterodox development economics literature mentioned above with insights from heterodox literature on financialisation, and more recently, Critical Macro Finance (CMF) to examine the systemic nature of rent-seeking and corruption within economies that have liberalised finance and become financialised.

In order to apply this development literature, especially its approach and conclusions regarding corruption, to South Africa, the methodology used for this paper extends my previous writing on understanding corporate structure and financialisation of the South African economy. The overall heterodox economic approach of my work on South Africa has been examining its economic evolution within history, institutions and global economic changes that affect South African society and systems of accumulation over time. This work builds on literature that presents the system of accumulation in South Africa as a minerals-energy and finance complex (MEFC) (Fine 2026).

2. Corruption and state capture in heterodox development economics

The hegemonic neoliberal variant of neoclassical economics is based on a false dichotomy of market and state. A major limitation of this perspective, which seems to be generally applied to mainstream economics discussions of corruption and state capture, is that it spotlights the public sector and normally downplays the role of private individuals and businesses, particularly large corporations. A historical, institutional analysis shows the close relationship and often blurred lines between the private and public sectors.

Much of the mainstream discourse on corruption focusses on states. Within this discourse, politicians and bureaucrats break the rules to enrich themselves. Khan (2004, 3) says that ‘the conventional analysis of “good governance” is explicitly based on a neoclassical analysis of the role of the state in economic development’. Khan explains that the neoliberal form of neoclassical economics assumes that the main functions of the state are to protect stable property rights, maintain low levels of corruption, and commit itself to democracy. The author points out that this neoliberal neoclassical economics is based on a prior assumption that ‘the market is sufficient to ensure rapid development and, as long as the state maintains stable property rights and an environment of low transaction costs and low expropriation risk, the market will work efficiently’ (Khan 2004, 3). This perspective informs governance reforms that prioritise market liberalisation and anti-corruption measures to reduce transaction costs. These reforms impose a neoliberal discipline on developing countries.

A wide range of heterodox development economists on corruption reject the mainstream views on good governance and its agenda. A heterodox economics perspective understands corruption as a symptom of deeper structural issues. It requires a political economy perspective that considers power and economic rents within a historical context and legacies of colonialism. Moreover, issues of dependency, power and global capitalism should provide a broader framing for discussions of corruption.

Returns earned by individuals or firms for products or services that are larger than would be received in competitive markets are classified as economic rents in mainstream economics (Khan 2000). Khan (2000, 5) asserts: ‘But since the competitive market of theory does not usually exist, a more useful definition is an income which is higher than the minimum which an individual or firm would have accepted given alternative opportunities.’ The author chooses to define rent seeking as ‘activities which seek to create, maintain or change the rights and institutions on which particular rents are based’ (Khan 2000, 6). The existence of rents is an incentive to pursue rent seeking.

For heterodox development economists, the key issue is not the existence of rents themselves, but whether states can discipline rent-seeking behaviour and direct rents toward productive developmental outcomes. A development economist writing on the Asian growth miracle explained the importance of the state in disciplining large corporations and influencing the allocation of capital. Alice Amsden (1989), in a study of South Korea, explained that by conventional definitions the actions of the Park Chung Hee regime could be described as corrupt. Amsden differs with this view and argues that the subsidies and tariff protection, which mainstream economists would describe as unfair access to rents, were provided with strong reciprocal and disciplinary performance standards. A key requirement was that the productive enterprises given access to those rents achieve export competitiveness and success within a predetermined period.

Development economists such as Amsden (1989, 2001, 2007), Chang (2002) and Wade (1990) challenged neoliberal critiques of state intervention by demonstrating that successful industrialisation historically depended on developmental states capable of disciplining capital and strategically managing rents. Chang (2002) argues that corruption is associated with poverty. Like Amsden (1989) and Wade

(1990), Chang asserts that the way corruption affects countries is highly context specific. Chang (2002) accuses the developed countries of ‘kicking away the ladder’ when they impose neoliberal policies that obstruct development in developing countries.

Amsden (2007) built on previous work to critique mainstream economics that promoted the Washington Consensus (WC). The author argues that post-1980s neoliberal policies, advocated and imposed by the United States (US), other developed countries, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, to deregulate trade and financial markets and privatise state-owned banks and enterprises, exacerbated corruption in developing countries. Amsden (2007) explained that the imposition of these ostensible reforms generally occurred without implementing adequate regulatory institutions. This inadequate regulatory environment created an institutional context where politically connected and influential private interests were able to capture states. They were able to acquire public enterprises. The result in many cases was access to rents without reciprocal conditions and the stripping of assets that hollowed out public enterprises. Unlike the developmental states of East Asia, Latin American countries’ capitalists were involved in the extraction of profits and rents rather than productive investment. Palma (2003) explains how neoliberal financial deregulation, particularly of cross-border capital flows, created conditions for excessive rent-seeking and financial profligacy that increased systemic financial risks and macroeconomic instability.

An important area of concern for developmental states is to discipline finance regarding the allocation of finance and ensuring that the potentially sizable rents generated in financial markets are well managed. Financial liberalisation, particularly since the 1980s, has led to increased financial flows and increased use and creation of financial instruments that generate large rents, but also increase systemic risks in domestic economies and internationally. Financialisation, which includes concern about the rise of finance and rentiers and their growing influence, has been associated with growing systemic risk and financial crises (Epstein and Jayadev 2005; Epstein and Power 2003). Financial rentiers have used their political and economic power and influence to extract rents. These rentiers influence regulation, institutions, and market formation in ways that have allowed them to ‘mould economic policies and structure in their interest’ (Epstein and Jayadev 2005, 1). Epstein and Habbard (2013) posit that the narrow, most used definition of speculation refers to placing a bet on the short-term change in the price of a commodity or financial asset. The association of speculation with rent-seeking leads one to the broader definition, which Epstein and Habbard (2013) define as ‘any socially unproductive financial activity’ (330). Therefore, speculation could be taken to mean not only financial speculation, but any activity for which ‘social utility to the real economy is close to zero’ (Epstein and Habbard 2013, 331).

Heterodox economists also linked financial liberalisation and financialisation to increased rent-seeking, speculative activity and the growing influence of financial elites over states and policymaking. Since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), a new school within heterodox economics called CMF has emerged (see Dutta et al. 2020; Gabor 2020 for an introduction). CMF literature adds a new dimension to the discussion of corruption and state capture. This literature highlights institutionalised and legal corruption that occurs through the operation of the global financial architecture and the relationship between finance and states. Gabor (2020) describes a shift from the Washington Consensus to what the author labels the Wall Street Consensus (WSC). Gabor (2020) explains that the WSC still includes much of the WC advice. However, the WC has been updated in an era of financialisation through a concerted push by the international financial institutions, governments and international financial institutions to reorganise state development interventions, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and efforts to address global climate change, around partnerships with global finance.

Recent CMF literature argues that states increasingly use public guarantees and derisking mechanisms to attract private finance, effectively socialising risk while protecting private profitability (Gabor 2020; Gabor and Braun 2023).

3. Analysing corruption and state capture in post-apartheid South Africa through a heterodox development economics lens

Framing economic changes within a historical and institutional systems of accumulation framework reveals the failures of the state-market dichotomy of mainstream economics by showing the interaction, cooperation, tensions and conflict between different actors and interest groups within society. Fine and Rustonjee (1996) argue that the minerals-energy complex (MEC) was the system of accumulation established in South Africa. More recent work on the system of accumulation in South Africa shows that financialisation has made the MEC the MEFC (Fine 2026). The MEC analysis shows how the mining-finance houses worked within and outside of state structures to develop and maintain important socio-economic institutions and infrastructure fundamental to South Africa’s racial capitalist system, such as the cheap, Black, migrant labour system that underpinned minerals extraction, the formation of a national electricity grid and Escom (which was renamed Eskom during apartheid), and the opening of the Free State gold fields in the late 1940s and 1950s, which consisted of eleven new major mines with several new towns, infrastructure and finance mechanisms. The colonial and apartheid systems

were deeply corrupt. Van Vuuren (2006) documents the deeply entrenched relationship between state power, racial domination and corruption during the apartheid period. The apartheid economy was fundamentally extractive and exclusionary, enabling a section of the population to accumulate wealth and opportunities through racist governance, dispossession and the exploitation of Black labour. Those closely connected to political and corporate power benefitted through rent-seeking, preferential access to state contracts and protected economic opportunities, particularly within large Afrikaans businesses.

The post-apartheid economy inherited these structural inequalities, concentrated corporate power and institutionalised forms of corruption. Much mainstream economic analysis, however, remains ahistorical and treats economic endowments and market structures as given. Even where neoclassical economics relaxes assumptions of perfect competition, it generally continues to model firms and individuals as operating independently of systems of racial exclusion, political influence and structural exploitation, reducing market power to questions of price and output rather than broader relations of power and accumulation. My co-author and I, in Khan and Mohamed (2023), argue that much of the discussion of the transition from apartheid to democracy presents corporate elites as passive observers and mere stakeholders in policy formation. We challenge views that presume that corporate power affects only quantity and prices and the state-market dichotomy. Khan and Mohamed (2023) show that corporate elites had been incorporated and participated in the apartheid government security structures and actively shaped economic policy during the apartheid governing regimes of PW Botha and FW De Klerk. We argue that the elites of large corporations remain involved in policymaking through South Africa's transition from apartheid. The post-apartheid government's adoption of neoliberal ideology and the neoliberal variant of neoclassical economic thinking to shape their policies reinforced this continuity of corporate-elite policy formation.

A key point of agreement between Khan and Mohamed (2023) and other literature on the transition (for example, Bond 2000; Padayachee and Van Niekerk 2019) is that a few highly influential politicians, most of whom were from the African National Congress, were given opportunities to become part of the big business elite that controlled the largest corporations through shareholding and directorships on boards. There has also been a revolving door between ministerial and senior bureaucratic positions in government, the Reserve Bank, and senior executive positions in private large corporations, particularly in powerful, large financial corporations.

In Khan and Mohamed (2023), this process is described as the incorporation of politically powerful individuals into the old elite. The old elite refers to the remnants of the largest conglomerates, including financial corporations, that Fine and Rustonjee (1996, 96) describe as the 'six axes of capital' of South Africa. The six axes refer to the conglomerates that combined mining, financial and other sectoral interests that put them at the commanding heights of the economy. During the 1990s, there was unbundling and reconstituting of the largest conglomerates, including the Anglo American Corporation, which moved its primary listing from the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to the London Stock Exchange in 1997. Mondliwa and Roberts (2019) illustrate that the subsidiaries of these giant groups preserved market dominance, even though their conglomerate parents had unbundled. The influence of finance within this corporate elite has grown as the size of financial institutions, their contribution to value-added has grown and the economy has become increasingly financialised (Mohamed 2017).

This background provides a historical and institutional lens for understanding the post-apartheid South African economy. One implication from the heterodox development economics literature is that post-apartheid South Africa failed to establish a developmental state. As Amsden (1989) and Wade's (1990) work suggests, the government did not follow an industrialisation strategy. The government did not provide support to capitalists with reciprocal performance conditions. Instead, the government provided subsidies and incentives that generated rents for large, energy- and capital-intensive firms that produced raw materials or products with low levels of value-added—most notably through cheap electricity and tax incentives, including accelerated depreciation of capital goods. South Africa experienced what Amsden (1989) described for Latin America: the inability of the state to discipline the elites and the provision of incentives without conditions led to an entrenched predatory business elite that extracted capital. Palma (2022) describes South Africa as an honorary Latin American economy, because of the similarities with the rent-seeking, extractive elites in several of those countries.

The experience of state-owned enterprises, particularly Eskom, illustrates the consequences of failing to build a developmental state capable of disciplining both public and private interests. During apartheid, Eskom formed part of the MEC that supported the accumulation strategies of large mining and industrial corporations through the provision of cheap electricity (Fine and Rustonjee 1996). In the post-apartheid period, however, the state failed to transform Eskom into a developmental institution capable of supporting industrial diversification, energy transition and broad-based economic development. Instead, Eskom became increasingly vulnerable to political interference, procurement manipulation, corruption and state capture (Bhorat et al. 2017). At the same time, large energy-intensive corporations continued to benefit from favourable pricing arrangements and forms of state support that reflected the persistence

of historically concentrated industrial power (Mondliwa and Roberts 2019). Therefore, the resulting crisis cannot be understood simply as the outcome of corruption during the Zuma years. Rather, it reflects the broader failure to restructure the relationship between the state, finance and dominant corporate interests within a developmental framework.

The first post-apartheid government was a government of national unity where the key economic ministerial posts, including land and agriculture, finance and trade and industry, were initially allocated to National Party members of Parliament and white businesspeople who had been part of the apartheid government (Khan and Mohamed 2023). By 1996, the new government had adopted a neoliberal economic programme, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR), to replace the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). GEAR was an austerity-minded, neoliberal programme in line with WC principles. It marked a conscious choice to follow governance from a neoliberal ideological stance and neoclassical macroeconomics. GEAR implemented mainstream neoliberal neoclassical macroeconomic policies that are still in use today. It promised a monetary policy to control inflation and a fiscal policy that kept government expenditure in check with the aim of running primary budget surpluses (or very low deficits) to reduce government debt. GEAR advocated privatisation, trade and financial liberalisation, including relaxing exchange controls. It reflected a neoliberal macroeconomic framework centred on fiscal restraint, inflation targeting, trade liberalisation and investor confidence.

The neoclassical macroeconomic policy approach is also a problem, because the South African economy remains extremely concentrated across all key economic sectors (Buthelezi, Mtani and Mncube 2018). Structural reforms have supported the largest corporations that extract wealth but choose not to reinvest much in South Africa. Vilikazi and Bosiu (2023) analysed the Top 100 companies (by market capitalisation) listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) and found that they reinvested only to maintain their current capital stock, not to expand it. These companies chose to invest capital in mergers and acquisitions and investments abroad.

A key problem with the supply-side reforms is that while they may support some large and small businesses, they are of most benefit to the very large corporations that dominate the economy. The government's approach to the reforms does not consider the heterodox development economics line of reasoning that economies are path dependent. Therefore, to address industrialisation of the economy that supports increased value-added, a greener growth path and create sufficient employment opportunities, there is a need for structural transformation of the economy.

Structural transformation requires a developmental state to manage rents and ensure the adequate implementation of industrial, environmental and other developmental policies. Much of the explanations by the government, business and media of the poor performance of the economy, particularly since the GFC, are that it was caused by corruption and state capture during the Zuma years. An important contribution to the discussion on corruption and state capture during the Zuma years is by Bhorat et al. (2017), which provides a well-detailed description of corruption and state capture in South Africa. One of the goals of the project is to understand the developments in South Africa within a global context.

Bhorat et al. (2017) situate South Africa's state capture within broader global trends involving authoritarian and neopatrimonial political formations. They do not blame all the poor performance of the economy during the Zuma years on corruption and state capture by organised groups of corrupt people, however, this type of analysis has reinforced explanations (of a more simplistic nature) that equate poor economic performance with corruption. Bhorat et al. (2017) label the post-apartheid Mbeki administration (1999–2008) as the 'constitutional transformers' who tried to 'reform' the economy and the Zuma era as having 'radical reformers' who focussed on developing a 'symbiotic relationship between the constitutional state and shadow state' (3).

Bhorat et al. (2017) explain the failure of the constitutional transformers' attempts to transform the economy by arguing that there was a complex negotiated agreement on the Constitution, which included some kind of deal with major conglomerates. These conglomerates would invest in the post-apartheid economy, particularly in manufacturing. The authors point out that a 'small group of people representing the conglomerates that owned the large bulk of assets could make this deal' (Bhorat et al. 2017, 11). In Khan and Mohamed (2023), we call this group of people the old elite and recognise that this old elite had groomed and incorporated a group of politically influential and powerful individuals aligned with the African National Congress into their ranks.

Bhorat et al. (2017, 11) argue that 'the combined impact of the shareholder value movement, financialisation, trade liberalisation (from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades to the World Trade Organisation), BEE deals and import-dependency combined to break up these conglomerates and severely limit investment, particularly in the manufacturing sector'. The authors add to this list of reasons for low investment that the listing of some of the major South African corporations abroad, which these corporations justified by saying that it would allow them to better raise capital to invest in South Africa, actually led to disinvestment.

The large corporate interests and the old elite had been given the ability to develop policy during the late apartheid period, and they retained this power during the transitional executive authority and within the government of national unity formed after the first democratic elections. Khan and Mohamed (2023) argue that the ability of the corporate old elites to develop policy that suited their interests and their retention of huge influence through the transition and into the post-apartheid state amounts to a form of state capture. Within a heterodox developmental economic framework, it also points to a corrupt situation where the elites are provided with rents and subsidies, but not required to meet performance conditions.

The work of Singh (1998) raises the importance of linking corruption and state capture to financial liberalisation and rising power, and the influence of domestic and multinational finance. The South African economy has liberalised and financialised under the post-apartheid government. There is a close relationship between senior politicians and bureaucrats with financial institutions, with rent-seeking and speculative domestic and multinational financial corporations holding much influence over the South African government. Acceptance of neoliberal ideology and neoclassical economics has encouraged the government to view itself as dependent on finance for borrowing, investor confidence and credit ratings.

What Bhorat et al, (2017, 12) describe as the 'power elite', Khan and Mohamed (2023, 8) refer to as the 'aspiring elite'. However, private businesses that are merely large (as well as medium and small), not corporate giants, are included into this category. The aspirant elites include politically influential politicians and bureaucrats, and businesspeople who were not incorporated into the old elite, however, aspire to increase their wealth and ownership within the economy. Unfortunately for them, the very large and dominant corporations controlled by the old elite and their allies have not invested adequately and have been part of a neoliberal hegemonic project that includes senior politicians and bureaucrats who have stopped the state from becoming a developmental state. The largest corporations have been using predatory and collusive behaviour for decades, where they either crush or buy up emerging businesses to maintain market dominance (Lewis 1995; Mncube and Grimbeek 2016). Therefore, considering Chang's (2002) argument that corruption is associated with poverty and lack of economic development, one must consider the actions of the aspirant elites within the broader context of a heterodox development economics understanding of corruption. Clearly, members of the aspiring elite were corrupt, and their corruption must not be excused. The corrupt actions of members of the aspirant elites involved in state capture and corruption have contributed to poor performance of the economy, however, this corruption seems to be a consequence and in part, a response to a larger system of corruption and state capture associated with an extractive, rent-seeking elite and its influence over a neoliberal government.

The persistence of extreme inequality and unemployment in South Africa reinforces the broader systemic dimensions of corruption discussed in this article. Corruption does not occur in isolation from the country's structural economic crisis. It is embedded within conditions of concentrated wealth, limited economic opportunities and weak developmental transformation. In this context, corruption and rent-seeking become intertwined with struggles over access to resources, state institutions and economic power. The inability of the post-apartheid state to generate inclusive growth and meaningful structural transformation has contributed to declining public trust in democratic institutions and increased contestation over access to state resources. This dynamic helps explain why corruption and state capture became so deeply embedded within political and economic networks after apartheid. A heterodox developmental economics perspective, therefore, requires corruption to be understood not merely as moral or administrative failure, but as part of a broader crisis of accumulation, inequality and developmental governance.

The response of the Ramaphosa administration to the poor economic performance of the South African economy since 2018 has been to intensify neoliberal economic policies, while blaming poor economic performance of the economy on corruption and state capture. The intensification of neoliberal policies has occurred through the government's acceptance of the structural reforms proposed by the National Treasury (NT) and Operation Vulindlela, a joint initiative by the South African Presidency and the NT designed to accelerate structural reforms and economic growth. The idea that the government has been inefficient, wasteful and corrupt has been an important subtext of these reforms. These reforms implicitly promote reduction of the state in building infrastructure and provision of services and more private sector involvement in services and other activities that have traditionally been provided by the state. The government has promoted a view that it has very little fiscal space and its role in provision of economic infrastructure is not to build the infrastructure, but to use public finances to leverage private sector corporations to build infrastructure.

CMF argues that neoliberal hegemony has ingrained the idea that governments do not have fiscal space to invest and that the private sector is better at building infrastructure and delivering projects than the public sector. The austerity and new public management mindset of governments lead them to believe that they must attract private corporations to invest and build projects. Gabor and Braun (2023) describe a macrofinancial derisking regime where the state has loose discipline over private capital, however, uses its balance sheet, increased contingent liabilities and public funds to derisk projects to make them attractive to private institutional finance.

The South African Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REI4P) is an important example of such a derisking agenda where private sector corporations are provided with very high levels of state support to build projects that could very likely have been (possibly should have been) performed by the public sector. The argument that the government does not have fiscal space coupled with high levels of corruption and high debt of Eskom were aspects of the justification for attracting private businesses to undertake the projects. The first REI4P bidding process was initiated in 2011. The Independent Power Producer (IPP) Office was set up as a joint project between the NT, the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the Department of Energy, with the NT clearly the most powerful and influential of the parties involved. The process shifted implementation of renewable energy projects away from Eskom and the National Electricity Regulator of South Africa. The operation of the office sent a clear signal to business and finance that the government was on board with financialising public infrastructure and services. Eberhard, Kolker and Leigland (2014, 9) report about the new IPP Office team:

Largely because the team was familiar with private sector infrastructure projects, as well as most of the bankers, lawyers, and consultants involved in such projects in South Africa, the unit did not start out with the level of mistrust of private business that sometimes characterizes other government agencies in South Africa. Dialogue with private sector counterparts on key REIPPPP design and implementation issues began almost immediately and continued throughout the process. The program was managed from the outset in a fashion that was tailored toward generating enthusiastic participation by private sector players.

The winning bidders sign twenty-year inflation indexed power purchase agreements with Eskom. The NT provides a 100 per cent guarantee on the power purchase agreements in a separate agreement that is between the NT itself and independent power producers. Mmakgoshi Lekhethe, the NT's Deputy-Director General for Asset and Liability Management, stated in 2024 that 'the contingent liability on the state's books for these IPPs is no longer sustainable' (Erasmus 2024). The 2026 Budget Review document of the NT (published when the Minister of Finance does his Budget Speech) reports that contingent liabilities to independent power producers have risen to ZAR303.1 billion, with exposure at ZAR244.3 billion (National Treasury 2026).

This process of derisking where the state creates contingent liabilities rather than implementing direct, on-budget expenditure to complete projects, may not be adequately transparent and creates potential future risk for government's finances. The risk is that guarantees and other derisking measures will eventually have to be paid from the government's budget. The REI4P clearly fits into the framework described by Gabor and Braun (2023) as a derisking macro finance regime. They describe this regime as one that embeds a process for financialisation of government investment and expenditure on infrastructure projects and efforts to respond to global climate change. Financial rentiers securitise and sell the debts of these derisked public-private partnerships (PPP) projects, which allows rentiers to increase the pace and number of derisked projects they finance across the globe. This financialisation of public investment and spending changes the relationship of finance to project developers and institutional financiers. The state becomes an instrument for systemically transferring public wealth and ability to bear risk to private corporations and guaranteeing profits of global finance.

4. Conclusion

Recent debates on corruption and good governance have been shaped by major developments in global finance and financial liberalisation. The theoretical contribution of this article is to promote a heterodox political economy understanding of corruption in South Africa through applying insights into corruption and rent-seeking from heterodox development economic literature. It updates the older heterodox economics literature with insights from heterodox developmental and political economy analysis of financial liberalisation and financialisation since the 1990s through to the post-2008 GFC period. It draws on the relatively recent contributions of CMF to examine how neoliberalism underpinned by financialisation has extended into state provision of infrastructure and services.

The heterodox development economics framework developed to understand corruption in South Africa challenges neoliberal accounts of corruption that isolate dysfunction within the public sector while ignoring the role of financialisation, corporate power, and extractive economic structures. Analysis of the causes of poor performance of the South African economy relies on the mainstream neoliberal view of corruption, focussed on the public sector. The organised corruption and state capture that intensified after the 2008 GFC damaged the South African economy, however, from a heterodox developmental economics perspective, these developments should be understood as symptoms of a broader extractive political-economic system, rather than the primary cause of economic decline. Rather than partner with the private sector project developers and financiers in a way that supports but also disciplines the private sector to achieve economic developmental goals, the government has fostered a derisking macro finance regime where it presents the state as inefficient, corrupt, generally inadequate and in need of market discipline.

The application of the heterodox development economic framework developed for the purposes of this article, shows that the government's intensification of neoliberal economic policies over the past decade moves South Africa further down a path-dependent, systemically corrupt path that allows entrenched elites to continue extracting wealth. Rather than advance industrial development and economic transformation, this intensification of neoliberal economic policies has led to further financialisation, including financialisation of public sector investments and service provision in a derisking macro finance regime. The broader policy conclusion to draw from this analysis is that a heterodox development economics understanding of the South African economy and identification of its problems and crises are required to change the current dysfunctional neoliberal economic policy trajectory of the country.

Future research expanding a heterodox developmental economics approach to understanding and combatting corruption should examine the implications of the derisking macro finance regime that has been initiated in South Africa, including initiatives such as Operation Vulindlela, the Presidential Investment Drive and the Presidential Climate Commission. The type of detailed work on corruption and state capture in Bhorat et al. (2017) could be continued, however, within a more structured heterodox developmental economics framework. More generally, research on macroeconomic stability, industrial development and policy could all benefit from shifting away from neoclassical and neoliberal mainstream economic methodologies to richer, more realistic heterodox developmental economics methodologies.

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Shadows and Light: Reconsidering State Capture and Development in South Africa's Power Sector

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Abstract

State capture has had lasting relevance in South Africa, serving as a conceptual aid in diagnosing dysfunction in the power sector, notably in the public power utility Eskom Holdings. This paper proposes a novel characterisation of state capture as a form of regime contestation, drawing on socio-technical transitions (STT) literature (Frank and Schanz 2022; Fuenfschilling and Binz 2018; Fuenfschilling and Truffer 2014; Geels 2014; Kirshner et al. 2019). It uses this characterisation to understand state capture as a coherent process in which mutable networks of public and private actors employ an opportunistic mix of legal and illegal interventions targeting state organs to reconfigure the regime, enabling their control over the distribution of power and resources. This understanding builds on analyses that elucidate the form and function of state-capture actor networks (Fazekas and Tóth 2016; Godinho and Hermanus 2018; Grzymala-Busse 2008; Maina 2019; Swilling 2018; Valencia, Ansolabehere, Espinal, Luna, Ortiz and Serrano 2019; Wedel 2001). While this understanding avoids the binary distinction between a captured and uncaptured state (Hellman, Jones, and Kaufmann 2000; Hellman and Kaufmann 2019; Hellman et al. 2001), this paper posits that an analysis of state capture remains troubled by normative questions. To reintroduce this dimension with more nuance, this paper creates a heuristic framework to characterise and problematise the power system regime, with reference to four domains of change (signals of regime contestation): formal (formal and informal rules); material (pertaining to resources and technology); agentic (authority, influence and agency) and strategic (goals and objectives). The framework is applied to a provisionally demarcated capture period (2009–2018) relative to the preceding (1994–2008) and subsequent (2019–2025) periods. This leads to an approach to capture considered on a spectrum, in relation to unavoidable questions regarding the legitimacy of the rules, goals and distribution of power and resources.

Keywords: state capture, energy transition, socio-technical transitions, regime contestation, regime destabilisation

1. Introduction

State capture has enduring relevance in South Africa, serving as a conceptual aid for diagnosing dysfunction in the power sector, notably at the public power utility Eskom Holdings (Eskom), from 2009–2018. The concept made a dramatic public debut with the publication of the then Public Protector's (Thuli Madonsela) report, *State of Capture: Report No. 6 of 2016/17*, in the last quarter of 2016 (Public Protector of South Africa 2016). At the time, Eskom was South Africa's largest state-owned company, a vertically integrated, monopolistic electricity utility, and the custodian of the country's coal-dominated generation fleet. The phrase "state capture" articulated a growing sense that state resources were being redirected away from developmental aims through irregularities in processes, investments, spending and hiring and firing at Eskom, which the report mentioned 913 times.

Drawing on World Bank reports (Hellman and Kaufmann 2019; Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman et al. 2001; Jones, Kaufmann and Schankerman 2000), the Public Protector identified extensive corruption, together with patterns that appeared to exceed corruption and were qualitatively distinct from it. With subsequent investigations (Portfolio Committee on Public Enterprises 2018), what became visible was a network that stretched from the office of the President, Jacob Zuma, into state-owned companies, across government ministries and departments, into large and small (local, foreign and multinational) private companies, to financial institutions, auditing firms and law firms, and foregrounding the now infamous Gupta family and their emissaries (Callaghan, Foley and Swilling 2021; Godinho and Hermanus 2018; Hermanus and Godinho 2021, Portfolio Committee on Public Enterprises 2018).

A decade after the Public Protector's report, this paper proposes a reconsideration of state capture, applied to Eskom and the power sector more broadly. While it acknowledges the useful provocation offered by the concept's originators, it eschews the implied binary distinction between a captured and an uncaptured state. Instead, it maintains, a context-sensitive focus on the form and function of state-capture actor networks, their institutional usurpation and distortion and the outcomes they produce (Fazekas and Tóth 2016; Godinho



and Hermanus 2018; Grzymala-Busse 2008; Maina 2019; Swilling 2018; Valencia et al. 2019; Wedel 2001). However, it proposes to reintroduce normative considerations into the analysis by reflecting on the consequences of capture on the sector's structure and outcomes. This is done by considering state capture as a form of regime contestation, drawing on socio-technical transitions (STT) literature (Frank and Schanz 2022; Fuenfschilling and Binz 2018; Fuenfschilling and Truffer 2014; Geels 2014; Kirshner et al. 2019).

To advance the conceptual approach, this paper develops a heuristic framework through which the process of state capture can be understood as regime contestation by identifying signals of regime change across four different domains. These are formal (rules, both formal and informal), material (resources and technology), agentic (authority, influence, and agency) and strategic (goals and objectives). These signals are read as indicative of a reconfiguring regime (regime signals). A comparative snapshot of the capture period (provisionally demarcated from 2009–2018) in relation to “pre-capture” (post 1994) and especially “post-capture” (the beginning of the energy transition) regime configurations lays the foundation for reconsidering state capture not as a binary (captured/uncaptured), but as a qualitative feature of infrastructural system regimes that can increase or decrease in magnitude or intensity.

2. A methodological approach and theoretical basis for conceptualising state capture

The approach followed in this paper is informed by empirical case studies that sought to characterise the form and function of state capture as a “political project” (Bhorat et al. 2017; Bracking 2018; Callaghan et al. 2021; Lodge 2018) of collusion by a dynamic, but coherent network of public and private actors colluding to control state structures and resources (Fazekas and Tóth 2016; Godinho and Hermanus 2018; Grzymala-Busse 2008; Maina 2019; Swilling 2018; Valencia et al. 2019; Wedel 2001). It builds on previous analyses of Eskom (Godinho and Hermanus 2018; Hermanus and Godinho 2021), but widens its analytical aperture to adopt a “system” view of the power sector as a functional whole, drawing on STT literature.

This paper uses the STT approach to conceptualise the “regime” and “regime destabilisation” (Frank, Feola and Schöpke 2024; Frank and Schanz 2022) to characterise the systemic shifts and consequences of the project identified as state capture. While there is no single understanding of the regime, it is broadly characterised as the resilient ‘locus of established practices and associated rules’ (Geels 2014, 23) and the ‘grammar’ (Frank and Schanz 2022, 254) that constrains and enables socio-technical systems and their policies, infrastructure, technology, actors, markets and more. While this emergent structuring may confer legitimacy, it is itself also subject to contestation of legitimacy (Sareen 2020; Sareen and Haarstad 2018). Increasingly, integrating power and politics into analyses has allowed for the conceptualisation of regime destabilisation as deliberately choreographed contests between incumbent dominant actors and others.

This paper understands state capture as a coherent process in which mutable networks of public and private actors use an opportunistic combination of legal and illegal interventions targeting state organs to reconfigure the regime to enable their control over the distribution of power and resources. This approach to state capture differs significantly from early uses, including initial uses in relation to the case of the South African state (Hellman et al. 2000; Hellman et al. 2001; Hellman and Kaufmann 2019; Jones et al. 2005; Pradhan 2000). These analyses rely on an uncaptured counterfactual against which capture can be juxtaposed, positing corruption as the goal of private actors unduly commandeering state organs by reshaping rules and norms. In contrast, this approach, understanding the regime as a structure or a grammar, identifies changes in rules and norms as falling within one category of regime signals—“formal”—that can be tracked in parallel to a consideration of corruption as one instance of another category of regime signal—“material”—also encompassing other resource flows, transactions and infrastructure investments. Given the centrality of the actor-network in the proposed approach, a third category of regime signals—agentic—is applied, most directly facilitating the tracing of the deliberate “project”.

While this paper eschews the particular normative commitments of early state-capture diagnostics, it retains a concern with the normative implications of identifying state capture as illegitimate. It does so, first, by adding to its prioritised regime signals of the sector's widely accepted and observed goals, targets and plans, and by questioning the relationship between these and the developmental role of the state. Second, this systematised approach enables a wider normative assessment regarding the legitimacy of the regime, across all four domains: formal (formal and informal rules), material (control over resources and technology), agentic (authority, influence and agency) and strategic (goals and objectives) (see Table 5.1). It is possible and may suit other applications of this heuristic to add other regime signals.

Table 5.1: Description of categories of regime signals

Regime signal	Description
Formal	Rules and norms, as reflected in policies, institutions, legislation, regulations, standards and other conventions
Material	The stocks, state and distribution of financial and other resources flows, infrastructure and technology
Agentic	Actors, relationships and the distribution of power and influence
Strategic	Accepted and observed goals, targets and plans

Process tracing is used in the current paper to map the development of this project in Eskom over time, identifying changes in relation to these regime signals. This is divided into three successive periods: pre-capture (1994–2008), capture (2009–2018) and post-capture (2019–2025). While the capture period is the primary focus, its precise demarcation is not. There was a significant increase in corruption (material signals) and in network penetration and political interference (agentic signals) at Eskom in 2010. However, many of these are directly or indirectly connected to former President Jacob Zuma, who was elected in 2009 and resigned in 2018. The 2009–2018 period is used somewhat expediently for the first iteration of this heuristic. The same demarcation may not apply to other state institutions, and it retains ambiguity (as does the designation of state capture).

While this analysis is not focussed on arguing for the illegitimacy of the capture network's project, it does identify idiosyncratic rule-breaking, bending and blurring, as well as grand corruption dwarfing the amounts recorded between 1994 and 2008. The characterisation is clearly not neutral, problematising the capture network's process and outcomes. This problematisation, however, does not imply that what preceded or followed it is, by comparison, neutral, good or uncaptured. Instead, three comparative snapshots of the power system concretise changes indicative of a reconfiguring regime, the legitimacy of which can be interrogated over each successive period.

The empirical content of the current paper draws significantly on research conducted between 2017 and 2020 and revisits, revises and adds to the analytical work from this period. It draws on interview transcripts, field notes and supplementary materials (for example, legal judgements, media reports, government documents, company reports and monitoring and evaluation documents). Supplementary materials analysed extend to 2025, with these materials carrying less weight in the characterisation of state capture. Additionally, the author's experience working on electricity, just transition and sustainable development governance has been used to corroborate and synthesise analytical insights, rather than as the primary evidence for analysis.

3. Contextualising and tracing Eskom's capture from 2009–2018

3.1. *Eskom's place in a democratising South Africa from 1994–2008*

At the onset of South Africa's democracy, the newly elected African National Congress (ANC)-led government inherited Eskom. The vertically integrated, monopolistic public electricity utility had played a central role in the apartheid government's national political-economic project. In 1994, Eskom's form, function and purpose were still inextricably entangled with the colonial and apartheid racial extractivist projects, morphing from the Electricity Supply Commission (1923–1985), into Escom (1985–1987) and Eskom (1987–2002). The coal-reliant utility is characterised by several scholars as the heart of the Minerals-Energy Complex (MEC) (Baker 2015; Fine 2010), a powerful capital-accumulation network connecting public energy investment to corporate interests in mining (coal and other metals and minerals) and other heavy industry. The MEC still looms large in South Africa's political imagination, reflecting Eskom's perduring enmeshment with corporate power (Baker 2019; Baker et al. 2015).

The ANC had to wrest Eskom from the shadows of its self-governance, a challenge even for the apartheid administration. The country's new Constitution required that energy policy shape the sector to serve the nation, improve lives and pursue greater sustainability. That demanded a fundamental reorientation away from primarily serving the country's white minority, as well as developing and sustaining industry and enriching and fortifying white industrialists. Accordingly, government established the National Electricity Regulator (NER) in 1995. Eskom was also placed under the direction and oversight of the Department of Energy, the Minister of Energy, the Cabinet and Parliament. It was subject to policy prescriptions, including energy access increase targets (from 36 per cent to 64 per cent of households, and eventually aiming for universal access), Free Basic Electricity (FBE) access (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2003, 2007), environmental controls and socio-economic performance parameters. Relatedly, Eskom was required to comply with the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Act (Act 53 of 2003) and the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act (2000), using public procurement and employment as levers to enable Black participation in a white-dominated economy.

It also sought to transform power sector governance in line with wider economic liberalisation efforts. To this end, two policy White Papers (the first step towards legislative reform) were published: first, the *White Paper on the Energy Policy of the Republic of South Africa* in 1998, and then the *White Paper on Renewable Energy* in 2003 (RSA 1998, 2003). These White Papers proposed transforming energy planning and governance, facilitating government-led policy development and oversight, and implementing structural reforms aligned with the standard model (separate generation, transmission and distribution) to break Eskom's monopoly by introducing independent power producers (IPPs) and renewable energy. Several laws were enacted to formalise aspects of these White Papers:

- The Eskom Conversion Act, 2001 (Act No. 13 of 2001) established Eskom Holdings SOC Ltd as a wholly state-owned publicly listed company.
- The National Energy Regulator Act (Act 40 of 2004) created the National Energy Regulator of South Africa (NERSA).
- The Electricity Regulation Act (Act 4 of 2006) provided the primary legal framework for the sector.

Notwithstanding these legal interventions, by 2008, Eskom had evaded all attempts at comprehensive reform, remaining vertically integrated and retaining monopolistic control of transmission and generation and more than half of distribution and sales (alongside municipalities). Lagging investment and ongoing corruption (as defined under public procurement law and Eskom's own policies) led to the commencement of load shedding (scheduled blackouts) and the declaration of an emergency. The ANC party was the direct beneficiary of the largest corruption scandal of this period (USD19 million). However, opportunities to manipulate procurement would soon mushroom as plans accelerated for two large coal power plants, Medupi and Kusile (each with a capacity of 4 800 MW) (Rafey and Sovacool 2011). The resignation of then-President Thabo Mbeki, who oversaw most of this complex political transition, would come to signify a sea change as Mbeki's Vice President, Jacob Zuma, ascended to the Presidency.

3.2. Nine years of choreographed commandeering of offices, processes and public procurement from 2009–2017

From its earliest diagnosis in the Public Protector's report and ensuing public discourse, state capture in South Africa was presented as a mutable networked project comprising public and private actors. It spanned companies, the presidency, different levels of government, national ministries and departments (including the National Treasury), State Owned Companies (SOCs), parliament, the National Prosecuting Authority as well as Chapter 9 Institutions meant to safeguard democracy (Portfolio Committee on Public Enterprises 2018). Its members played interchangeable intermediary, executive, implementation or beneficiary roles at different times. While consistently figural and often designated as the leader, President Zuma was often on the periphery of specific strategies. Zuma's leadership and network strategies in generation were framed as defiance of the illegitimate, enduring economic dominance of the country's white minority and 'white monopoly capital' (Callaghan et al. 2021). In private interviews and public testimony, this political project appeared simultaneously disingenuously deployed and sincerely held, sometimes by the same people.

In 2009, in a move welcomed by many pro-reform policy advisors, Zuma split the Department of Minerals and Energy into two departments with two ministries. The Department of Energy (DOE) led the first public Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) process, implementing a pivotal proposal of the long-outdated 1998 White Paper. Contradicting this move toward public accountability, testimony from the former Minister of Public Enterprises (May 2009 to October 2010), Barbara Hogan, reports that Zuma would thwart her crucial oversight role, notably pertaining to major procurement (Hogan 2019). Hogan was replaced as head of the now-dissolved ministry and its department, which had been a critical entry point for intervention in all state-owned companies. Malusi Gigaba (then Minister of Home Affairs) was Hogan's successor, having recently enabled the notorious Gupta family's unusually expeditious naturalisation. This pattern of deploying aligned actors to strategic offices would continue across key ministries and Eskom leadership through 2016, blurring, bending and breaking norms, and redefining functions and perceived mandates.

The DOE-led IRP 2010–2030 was developed nonetheless, published in the same month Hogan left, and promulgated in March 2011. Despite various critiques, this still represented a major shift in governance and the initiation of a process by which different constituencies could influence national policy through transparent channels. It also laid the foundation for an equally significant institutional change in the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP) and the IPP Office.

Contrary to national policy changes, Eskom's procurement was subject to network plans. As the sole offtaker of IPP generation, Eskom regularly undermined REIPPPP by failing to finalise offtake agreements with IPPs who had succeeded in state-run auctions. Its massive coal procurement contracts came into the capture network's crosshairs, challenging the dominance of the so-called "coal majors", Anglo Coal, Glencore, South32 (previously BHP Billiton) and Exxaro (majority Black-owned until 2016 through a BBBEE shareholding scheme). The

result was an accelerating pattern of irregular decisions (an early example being a tender that was awarded in March 2010 to the Chinese company Dongfang despite its high price). This was further enabled by the centralisation of Eskom's budgeting and procurement within the new Group Commercial Business Unit in September 2010. As irregular activities triggered pushback, further institutional engineering followed, with Gigaba overhauling the Eskom board in June 2011. The then-Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Brian Dames, would later testify that Gigaba's appointees set up improper parallel communication channels connecting Eskom procurement to political officials. Network-aligned executives and board members complicated, obfuscated and reinterpreted rules to enable politically predetermined outcomes. More generally, Eskom's internal governance became deeply conflictual, with executive and non-executive positions often changing suddenly and amid controversy.

In 2011, Zuma's Cabinet initiated a highly contested nuclear power procurement process. It was contradicted in 2013 by the DOE's still-unratified update to the IRP, which found that renewable energy was preferred over the proposed new large-scale nuclear energy (Montmasson-Clair and Ryan 2014). In this opacity, Zuma would continue to pursue nuclear procurement, evading public and parliamentary scrutiny. A reinforced network furthered this and other deals in 2014, with the re-elected Zuma (with Cyril Ramaphosa as his deputy) appointing Lynne Brown as the Minister of Public Enterprises. In parallel, control over Eskom's internal procurement was consolidated under Eskom stalwart Matshela Koko, who was promoted to head of the Group Technology and Commercial division in May. Reports of political influence over internal governance would continue over this time, concomitant with a slew of irregular and illegal procurement decisions and processes. In September, Zuma signed a controversial nuclear procurement deal with the Russian state-owned company Rosatom.

The coal power fleet was ailing under the strain of mismanagement and the loss of skilled personnel. It had become a strategic battleground in which the agents of the network were deployed through management consultancies, auditors, coal companies, Eskom's staff and its board and other service providers to divert planned procurement to its chosen Gupta-affiliated companies. Tshediso Matona, appointed Eskom CEO in October 2014, would testify that his tenure was abruptly truncated in October 2015 due to his resistance to the reshaping of resource flows from Eskom to Gupta-linked challengers of incumbent coal majors and service providers. While Eskom's spending swelled, the national fiscus strained, diverting ZAR83 billion to remedial bailouts, away from other urgent development priorities. Brian Molefe (appointed April 2015) and Anoj Singh (appointed August 2015) would, as CEO and CFO, respectively, transplant corporate state-capture agents from Transnet (the national rail freight company) through McKinsey and the Gupta-connected Regiments and Trillian (officially McKinsey's BBBEE partners). Irregular and illegal procurement ballooned in financial value and increased in its disregard for established norms and development goals. Molefe set the events central to the Public Protector's report in motion in May 2015, subsequently forcing Optimum Coal Holdings into business rescue, which eventually enabled it to be bought by the Gupta-owned Tegeta using public funds (ZAR659 million) illegally provisioned by Eskom in January 2016.

In 2015, the nuclear deal reemerged as ministerial co-option extended to the Minister of Finance, with Nhlanhla Nene usurped for less than a week by Des van Rooyen, plucked from obscurity, to rubberstamp the process, and then rapidly replaced by Minister Pravin Gordhan. The Constitutional Court would be an institutional barricade against the deal, employed by civil society to uphold rules and policies eroded through administrative distortion and undermining. Large-scale corrupt procurement continued well after the Tegeta scandal, the publication of the Public Protector's report, and even after the 21 June 2017 resolution of the Portfolio Committee on Public Enterprises (the Committee) to institute an oversight inquiry (Inquiry) into allegations of state capture. Outside the Committee, a different kind of network of researchers, civil society, business, and Eskom insiders (past and present) rallied to support this reassertion of institutional integrity.

3.3. An electricity sector in crisis: 2018 onward

In February 2018, Zuma resigned as president and was replaced by his deputy, Cyril Ramaphosa. The first of many more investigative commissions, the Zondo Commission, began its own inquiry into state capture in August 2018. The Inquiry report was adopted, revealing the level of damage. This was the beginning of an unprecedented era of blackouts, each one dealing a blow to the South African economy, shuttering businesses and bringing public services to a halt. Households, businesses and some more capable municipalities could improvise solutions from paraffin to inverters and embedded solar, without clarity on when supply would be stabilised. Others were left in the dark. These years, having undermined REIPPPP, also undermined the policy mechanisms it entailed to stimulate localisation of renewable energy supply chains and employment. To address this crisis, Ramaphosa established a centralised emergency task force, the Eskom Sustainability Task Team (Task Team), on 14 December 2018.

4. Characterising outcomes across four regime signal domains: Formal, material, agentic and strategic

4.1. Identifying key implications for South Africa's power system transition from 2019–2025

Ramaphosa repeatedly promised to fix Eskom, prioritising breaking its monopoly. Furthering this cause, the now-dissolved Department of Public Enterprises developed a *Roadmap for Eskom in a reformed electricity supply industry 2019* (RSA 2019). It resurrected key proposals from the moribund White Paper on Energy, with some of the same policy advisors involved in both. The foregrounded challenge was to access finance to manage Eskom's now crippling debt levels. It could not cover operating costs, nor undertake much-needed investment to maintain and expand generation, transmission and distribution. Public pressure was high, as the cost of keeping this dysfunctional system going was increasingly passed on to energy users, including the poorest households. The captured state came to be caricatured in juxtaposition with private sector efficiency. The former was associated with the MEC, Zuma's nuclear deal and corruption in general. The latter was connected to renewables and "energy democracy" (Szulecki 2017). Public discourse sketched these alternatives in blunt, unhelpful terms, leading to discursive impasses. The crisis narrative appeared to preclude sober public debate on the appropriate role of the state in an economy still marked by 'persistent and obscene inequality' (Mohamed 2024 17).

The state capture network's operations had undeniably destabilised the pro-coal power sector regime, creating a window for the implementation of the beleaguered renewable energy policy. In line with the Roadmap, Eskom's financial situation led to internal and external pressure to open the generation industry (the source of most of Eskom's debt) to private investment beyond REIPPPP's tightly controlled public procurement processes. Within this window, the Presidency advanced a just transition policy agenda, a participatory approach to a managed transition away from coal power, in line with national climate commitments, environmental legislation and techno-economic assessments of technology options. The newly established Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) brought together different stakeholder constituencies to consult and inform policy, including the country's just transition framework (Presidential Climate Commission, 2022; Secretariat of the Presidential Climate Commission 2021). This was leveraged to produce a Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET IP) (RSA 2022), the first of its kind multilateral financial support package from donor countries linked to decarbonisation commitments. The main success of the JET IP was to raise finance for an otherwise unfundable Eskom, an essential intervention to support the impending increase in renewables.

The second course of action was a programme of dramatic legal and regulatory reform. Two successive amendments were made to the Electricity Regulation Act in 2021 and 2022, removing licensing requirements for private generation, and enabling direct transactions and energy wheeling between IPPs and private offtakers. Eskom and local governments worked to develop regulations to enable small and medium embedded renewable energy generation and wheeling (Hermanus, Scholtz and Kritzing 2022; SALGA 2023). The utility's legal restructuring also continued, establishing a more independent National Transmission Company of South Africa (still a wholly owned subsidiary of Eskom Holdings) in 2024. In the same year, renewable energy generation reached 18 per cent of installed capacity, with private investment overtaking REIPPPP's contribution. Policy and regulation had to play catch-up, with NERSA adopting the Regulatory Rules on Network Charges for Third-Party Transportation of Energy in South Africa in March 2025. As electricity tariffs steadily climbed, load shedding finally ended. However, challenges remained, including unaffordable energy for most South Africans, persistent energy poverty, inadequacies in the transmission and distribution systems, questions about market design, unmanaged spatial impacts of a declining coal sector and Eskom still determining, in many aspects, its own pace and scope of change, contradicting national policy.

4.2. Comparative assessment

Table 5.2 creates a foundation for understanding state capture as a form of regime destabilisation and contestation. This table provides a snapshot of regime signals across three time periods: the dawn of the political transition from 1994–2008, 2009–2018 and the beginning of the energy transition from 2019–2025. In line with the approach in Section 2, it traces regime signals across four domains to show how the state capture network deliberately destabilised and contested the regime, with lasting consequences, formal (formal and informal rules), material (control over resources and technology), agentic (authority, influence and agency) and strategic (goals and objectives).

Table 5.2: Selection of salient formal, material, agentic and strategic regime signals

Regime signals	Pre-capture regime signals: 1994–2009	Capture regime signals: 2009–2018	Transition regime signals: 2019–2025
Formal	Government sought to reconfigure and replace apartheid era rules, establishing an independent regulator. Wholesale reform proposals were made and mostly resisted, and Eskom remained a vertically integrated monopoly. Nonetheless, a series of laws were introduced to change its internal governance and accountability to government.	While Eskom remains a vertically integrated monopoly, the first IRP with public participation was driven by the state and published between 2009 and 2011. The country was left without a formal plan for eight years, before an official update gazetted by Cabinet. In the interim, the REIPPPP is successfully introduced. The liberalisation agenda was suspended. Eskom's governance, and the norms defining its relationship to government (especially public enterprises) are variably blurred, bent and broken.	Eskom's crisis is used as an opportunity to reintroduce proposals for unbundling, repackaged and tabled with strong support and opposition. The just transition is advanced as a policy agenda and the JET IP, in parallel, sector reform is pushed through, liberalising the generation industry. Eskom's unbundling into three separate generation, transmission and distribution subsidiaries is implemented, however, resisted as slowed at times.
Material	Eskom resists attempts to diversify its coal generation to include renewables. Its coal dependence sustained significant employment, but still largely benefitted a handful of coal majors most, while externalising social and environmental costs. Eskom's procurement became subject to economic transformation imperatives, and in parallel, irregular procurement sought to redirect resources to the ruling party, notably through deals with foreign actors. Investment lags lead to load shedding and a national emergency.	South Africa remains dependent on coal, with limited inclusion of renewable energy through the REIPPPP, IPPs. However, the REIPPPP is consistently undermined, while a nuclear deal with Rosatom is unsuccessfully pursued. The coal majors remain entrenched, with contestation to this dominance advanced through irregular and illegal procurement implemented through the state capture network. Consequently, Eskom experiences an unprecedented financial crisis. Load shedding continues.	The liberalisation of the generation market sees the share of renewables climb to 18 per cent in 2024. The JET IP is used to draw investment into Eskom, however, fails to enable the scale of network investment needed. The state absorbs significant Eskom debt. There are continued reports of irregular procurement at Eskom, but at a reduced pace and scale. Irregularities persist at the distribution levels too. Load shedding continued until 2024. Electricity tariff restructure and increases aim to recover costs, passed onto users that cannot afford it.
Agentic	The ANC inherited and works to open, a sector closed from view, dominated by rich interconnection between mining, energy and industrial interests (the MEC), operating beyond government oversight and accountability. The coal majors dominated Eskom's coal procurement, with only one company having majority Black ownership (51 per cent). Eskom's internal power was evident in its capacity to avoid government reforms. As Zuma takes office, he intervenes directly in Eskom's governance.	The network uses BBBEE to move some of the old actors (deemed white monopoly capital) out and replace them with Gupta-linked companies that are not Black-empowered. In concert, key positions in Eskom's executive and Board, as well as ministerial positions are filled with capture-aligned appointees. Outside Eskom, the IPP Office advances the REIPPPP despite resistance. The states and Eskom's roles in the sector are widely questioned and contested.	The energy sector is profoundly reconfigured, as the generation market is liberalised. REIPPPP's mechanisms to advance economic transformation through public procurement conditionalities are replaced by a multistakeholder approach to energy industrialisation under the South African Renewable Energy Masterplan (SAREM). The renewable lobby grows in power and prominence.
Strategic	The sector is actively repositioned as a means of supporting the new democratic state, by creating opportunities for Black business, employing Black professionals, and powering the homes of more South Africans, especially Black and poor households. The expansion of energy access is a visible manifestation of the ANC-led government's development reorientation of the South African state.	The ability of the sector to support democracy is eroded as electricity costs and debt are subordinated to the moving of resources from the state into the network of Gupta-linked and Zuma-linked companies in South Africa and abroad. The increasing unaffordability of electricity undermines the developmental role of the sector.	The significance of electricity to national development through access, as well as industrial integration is broadly acknowledged in just transition processes. However, private energy investment is market-driven, as opposed to developmentally anchored. Additionally, increasing unaffordability of electricity remains a serious challenge.

While the illegitimacy of Eskom's capture has been articulated (Godinho and Hermanus 2018; Hermanus and Godinho 2021), what is clearly illustrated is that this is not against a neutral counterfactual. All three periods show patterns that contradict the developmental and democratic vision for the power sector, first articulated in the 1990s, with benefits accruing to a connected group (tightly networked or otherwise). This warrants a nuanced alternative to a binary distinction (captured/uncaptured). State capture could, instead, be understood as a qualitative description that can increase or decrease in magnitude or intensity, and in which one state-capture network can supplant another. The legitimacy of the pre- and post-capture regime configurations was and remains actively contested by many.

Conclusion

This analysis goes beyond earlier work (Godinho and Hermanus 2018; Hermanus and Godinho 2021) to characterise state capture as a coherent process in which mutable networks of public and private actors use an opportunistic combination of legal and illegal interventions targeting state organs to reconfigure the regime to enable their control over the distribution of power and resources. Additionally, the legitimacy of this reconfiguration is problematised, with reference to rules and norms, resource distribution (not limited to corruption), power and agency, and the developmental role of the infrastructure system (in this case, South Africa's power system). It thus avoids the need for an idealised neutral position from which to objectively identify and evaluate state capture, while making explicit the normative dimensions implicit even in case studies that focus on the network-driven form and function of state capture. The implied normative judgement, however, is raised again *as* a problem rather than a prescription.

This paper begins to characterise state capture as a particular form of regime destabilisation and deliberate contestation. It does so by analysing provisionally demarcated state capture years (2009–2018) in relation to the preceding and subsequent periods. Understanding the political project of state capture as regime contestation demands a compatible approach to capture, conceived as a spectrum. While this does not logically preclude an uncaptured regime, to the extent that any regime is politically questioned, the possibility of capture remains, and the legitimacy of the regime is open to interrogation. For the 2019–2025 period, this interrogation is both necessary and beyond the scope of this paper.

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The Social Life of Anti-Corruption Narratives: Media and Campaign Representations in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The current study examines how anti-corruption is publicly constructed as a defence of democratic accountability across Sub-Saharan Africa. It analyses a purposive corpus of 80 publicly available texts, comprising news articles, LinkedIn posts and civil society campaign artefacts, produced between 2022 and 2025 across eighteen Sub-Saharan countries. Drawing on Social Representations Theory (SRT) and Narrative Theory (NT) and informed by an adapted Proppian heuristic for narrative sequencing, the study examines how anti-corruption is anchored in familiar moral categories, objectified through public symbols, institutions and events, and mobilised through recurring narrative structures that shape expectations of accountability and reform. The analysis identifies six recurring social representations that function as socially shared interpretive resources through which anti-corruption is understood, communicated and enacted across public narratives: Collective Responsibility, Everyday Accountability, Justice through Law, Civic Courage, Tangible Accountability and Ethical Renewal. Rather than representing discrete governance activities, these representations organise shared understandings of what anti-corruption is, who is responsible for it, how accountability should operate, and what constitutes meaningful democratic reform. Comparative analysis indicates that while these narrative functions appear across the region, South African cases place particular emphasis on procedural visibility and institutional accountability, operating as symbolic reference points within wider continental debates on the credibility of reform. Findings demonstrate that anti-corruption narratives are not merely reflections of governance reform but constitute shared systems of meaning through which democratic accountability is imagined, legitimised and sustained.

Keywords: Anti-corruption narratives; democratic accountability; social representations theory; narrative theory; public meaning; Sub-Saharan Africa

1. Introduction: Anti-corruption narratives as social life

Corruption has become one of the dominant public narratives through which governance failure is interpreted across Sub-Saharan Africa (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Shamsuddin 2023). Public understanding of integrity, accountability and reform is shaped not only by policy outcomes, but by the symbolic and narrative resources through which political reality is interpreted. Media, digital platforms, and civil society campaigns translate abstract governance concepts into morally legible stories, images, and exemplars that frame anti-corruption as futile, heroic, procedural, or transformative (Entman 2007; Miller 2012; Polletta 2006). Rather than treating public narratives as reflections of institutional processes, this study examines how they actively constitute civic expectations, draw moral boundaries and elevate positive outliers as evidence that reform is possible. It conceptualises anti-corruption as a form of social life. Second, it foregrounds the role of public narratives in stabilising expectations about what accountability looks like, who is responsible for it, and whether reform is imaginable. In this sense, anti-corruption narratives do not merely describe governance realities. They participate in producing them by shaping the interpretive frameworks through which citizens, institutions and intermediaries engage with questions of integrity and power. Treating anti-corruption as social life enables a more granular analysis of how legitimacy is constructed and contested across different communicative arenas.

2. From institutional failure to narrative governance

2.1. *Mainstream anti-corruption paradigms and their limits*

Mainstream anti-corruption paradigms, shaped by donor agencies, international financial institutions and transnational policy networks, have prioritised legal reform, institutional design, transparency mechanisms and enforcement capacity as the primary means of controlling corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Rothstein and Varraich 2017). While these approaches have established important normative benchmarks, their effectiveness has been widely questioned in contexts marked by deep inequality, elite capture and fragmented accountability ecosystems. A recurring critique concerns the dominance of Global North-derived frameworks, which often assume impartial institutions and shared normative commitments that do not consistently hold in postcolonial political economies, limiting sensitivity to historically embedded power relations and governance practices in African states (Olivier De Sardan 2008). In practice, reforms are frequently introduced without reshaping incentive structures, elite coalitions or material inequalities, contributing to reform fatigue and public cynicism.

A complementary critique is offered by Olivier de Sardan's (2008) concept of practical norms, which argues that governance in many African contexts cannot be understood solely through formal institutional rules. Although legislation and administrative procedures establish official expectations, everyday governance is frequently shaped by informal routines, negotiated practices and socially accepted ways of 'getting things done.' These practical norms do not replace formal institutions, but coexist with, and frequently reshape them in implementation. Consequently, anti-corruption reforms may appear robust institutionally while producing limited practical change if they fail to engage with the informal social meanings through which governance is experienced. This insight reinforces the argument that anti-corruption is not merely an institutional phenomenon but socially constructed and culturally mediated. Understanding anti-corruption, therefore, requires attention not only to institutional arrangements, but also to the shared meanings, symbolic practices and public narratives through which accountability is legitimised, contested and normalised.

2.2. *Corruption as a social norm and collective action problem*

From this perspective, corruption persists not because individuals lack information or formal incentives, but because corrupt behaviour is perceived as normal, expected or unavoidable within a given system (Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013; Rothstein 2011). This reframing implies that change requires more than detection and punishment. It requires shifts in legitimacy, trust and perceptions of procedural fairness, so that rule-following is experienced as feasible and non-punitive (Rothstein and Varraich 2017).

2.3. *Narrative, symbolism and cultural meaning in governance*

Narratives structure moral sequencing, assign roles and establish expectations of resolution or failure, shaping how power, responsibility and legitimacy are interpreted (Bruner 1986; Polletta 2006). Recent work on state capture shows how accountability can be enabled or disabled through strategically divisive narratives that polarise publics and delegitimise oversight (David-Barrett 2025). Systematic analysis of how this meaning-making operates across news media, professional digital spaces and campaign artefacts in Sub-Saharan Africa remains limited. Collectively, this literature points to a missing analytical layer answering how anti-corruption becomes publicly meaningful. This gap is particularly salient in Sub-Saharan African contexts, where governance is often mediated through hybrid institutional arrangements, informal norms, and historically embedded power relations. In these contexts, the success or failure of anti-corruption efforts cannot be understood solely in terms of institutional design or enforcement capacity. Rather, it depends on how these efforts are interpreted, narrated and legitimised within the public sphere.

The current study responds by analysing anti-corruption as a form of narrative governance. Narrative governance, as used here, refers to the processes through which public meanings, symbols and story structures shape how governance is interpreted, legitimised and contested. By introducing Social Representations Theory (SRT) and Narrative Theory (NT) as analytical lenses, it seeks to bridge the gap, examining not only what anti-corruption initiatives do, but also how they are made meaningful, credible or dismissed within everyday discourse. This study makes three contributions. First, it extends SRT into the domain of governance by showing how anti-corruption is stabilised through shared symbolic forms. Second, it introduces narrative sequencing as a diagnostic tool for identifying where accountability stalls between exposure and consequence. Third, it demonstrates how different communicative arenas (media, professional digital platforms and campaigns) re-weight shared representations in context-specific ways. By examining anti-corruption as a system of socially shared meanings

rather than solely as an institutional challenge, the current study contributes to a growing body of governance scholarship that foregrounds the symbolic dimensions of democratic accountability.

3. SRT and NT

The current study combines SRT, NT and an adapted Proppian narrative structure to analyse how anti-corruption is publicly constructed, stabilised and mobilised across media and digital spaces. The combined approach enables analysis of both the shared meanings that circulate and the narrative structures through which accountability either gains momentum or stalls.

3.1. SRT

SRT provides the primary analytical lens for examining how anti-corruption becomes intelligible and actionable in public narrative. Originating in Moscovici's work on how expert knowledge is transformed into common-sense understanding through communication (Moscovici 1988),¹ SRT focuses on the social production of shared meanings that guide everyday reasoning and judgement. Two core processes underpin this transformation, anchoring and objectification. Anchoring situates unfamiliar phenomena within existing moral categories and cultural frames, enabling publics to recognise and evaluate complex governance issues. In anti-corruption narratives, this occurs when corruption and reform are framed through familiar binaries like clean versus corrupt, integrity versus rot, or public interest versus private gain. Objectification renders abstract principles tangible by crystallising them into concrete symbols, images and exemplars, like visual metaphors of corruption as a destructive force, tip-off mechanisms, or headline figures for recovered assets, making anti-corruption morally legible. SRT is particularly well-suited to analysing anti-corruption, because public understanding depends less on formal definitions than on socially circulating representations that stabilise what corruption is, who is responsible and what responses are conceivable (Joffe 2003; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). In African governance contexts, where institutional distrust often coexists with strong moral expectations of leadership, these representations play a central role in shaping whether anti-corruption is perceived as futile, performative or transformative.

3.2. NT and moral framing

While SRT explains how meanings are stabilised, NT illuminates how those meanings are organised and mobilised through storytelling. Narratives structure events into moral sequences, assign roles, link actions across time and produce evaluations of responsibility and legitimacy (Bruner 1986). Anti-corruption narratives commonly rely on recognisable moral roles (heroes, villains and victims) and position audiences as judges or potential agents of action. Through this framing, narratives not only explain how corruption emerges, but also imply what kinds of responses are possible or warranted (Polletta 2006). Digital platforms add a performative dimension, enabling actors to publicly signal integrity, courage and reformist identity through professional and civic identity work.

3.3. Adapted Proppian quest arc for governance narratives

To analyse whether anti-corruption narratives merely circulate or generate momentum toward reform, this study draws on an adapted Proppian narrative structure as a conceptual heuristic (Miller 2012; Propp 1968). The value of this approach lies not in its formal structuralism, but in its capacity to foreground narrative movement, specifically the progression from problem identification to resolution. In governance contexts, this distinction is critical, as narratives that stall at exposure without consequence may weaken perceptions of accountability, while those that progress toward resolution reinforce the plausibility of reform. The Proppian sequence is, therefore, used to sensitise the analysis to questions of narrative momentum and closure, rather than as a rigid classificatory schema. The operationalisation of this heuristic within the empirical analysis is detailed in the section on analytical procedure.

The integration of SRT, NT and the adapted Proppian structure provides a multi-layered analytical framework with an effective tool that captures both the content and the dynamics of meaning-making. While SRT identifies the shared symbolic resources through which anti-corruption is rendered intelligible, NT explains how these resources are temporally organised into moral sequences, and the Proppian structure allows for the assessment of narrative progression or stagnation. This combination is particularly useful for analysing governance

¹ Writing about post-war France in the late 1950s, Moscovici (2008) described how Freudian psychoanalysis had moved beyond academic circles into newspapers, political debate and everyday conversation. Moscovici observed that different ideological groups reinterpreted the same scientific ideas in ways that aligned with their own values, revealing how knowledge changes as it circulates through public communication. This insight led Moscovici to ask how expert knowledge becomes transformed into common-sense understanding, forming the basis of SRT.

contexts characterised by uneven institutional performance, as it reveals how symbolic coherence can persist even where material outcomes are inconsistent or delayed.

4. Methodology and data

4.1. *Research design and epistemological position*

Guided by an interpretivist, narrative-oriented framework, the current study is structured around two research questions (RQ), which derive from a broader doctoral study employing a multi-method qualitative design that incorporates photovoice, semi-structured interviews and media analysis. RQ1 asks what social representations of anti-corruption circulate within grassroots narratives and practices across Sub-Saharan Africa. RQ2 examines how these representations shape trust-building, participatory governance and advocacy strategies within anti-corruption initiatives. The current study reports exclusively on the documentary component of that broader research programme, focusing on public anti-corruption narratives contained within news media, civil society campaign artefacts and professional digital platforms. The findings presented here should, therefore, be understood as one empirical strand contributing to the broader doctoral investigation.

The study adopts a qualitative, constructionist research design, grounded in the assumption that anti-corruption is not only an institutional practice, but a socially constructed field of meaning (Burr 2015; Denzin 1978). Rather than assessing institutional effectiveness or corruption outcomes, the analysis focuses on how anti-corruption is publicly narrated, symbolised and legitimised, and how these narratives shape expectations of accountability, participation and reform. Publicly visible narratives, including media reporting, professional commentary and campaign communication, are treated as key sites where shared understandings of anti-corruption are articulated and contested (Entman 2007; Polletta 2006). This approach aligns with SRT and NT, which prioritise collective sense-making over individual attitudes or private experience (Moscovici 2000; Riessman 2008).

4.2. *Dataset and case selection*

Empirical analysis draws on a corpus of 80 publicly facing texts, including grassroots-oriented campaign communication, between 2022 and 2025, a period marked by intensified governance scrutiny across Sub-Saharan Africa and the expanded use of digital platforms for civic engagement (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Bosch 2017). Purposive sampling included texts that focused primarily on anti-corruption or accountability, originated from recognised news media, civil society campaigns or professional digital platforms, and contained substantive narrative content rather than purely technical reporting. The sampled documents were subsequently analysed using SRT to identify processes of anchoring and objectification. The final corpus comprised 30 news articles, 40 LinkedIn posts and ten civil society campaign artefacts from across eighteen Sub-Saharan countries (Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia), providing sufficient diversity to identify recurrent representational patterns across the corpus. South African cases feature prominently, reflecting the country's centrality to continental debates on state capture and democratic accountability (Shamsuddin 2023). The corpus intentionally spans multiple communicative arenas through which anti-corruption narratives circulate. News media capture the public mediation of accountability discourse; civil society campaign artefacts reflect advocacy narratives produced by organisations working directly with communities and citizens; and LinkedIn captures professional governance discourse among anti-corruption practitioners. Together, these materials illuminate how anti-corruption narratives circulate between institutional, civic and professional publics.

LinkedIn is treated analytically as a professional-elite digital public sphere used by anti-corruption practitioners rather than a representative grassroots space, capturing how governance norms and reformist identities are publicly performed (Marwick 2013; Mutsaers 2016). This distinction is analytically significant. While news media and campaign artefacts often address broader publics, LinkedIn content reflects how governance norms, reformist identities and ethics are constructed and performed within practitioner networks. These spaces play a critical intermediary role, translating institutional discourse into publicly visible narratives that signal credibility, expertise and alignment with global governance standards. Including LinkedIn in the dataset enables the analysis to capture not only grassroots-oriented messaging, but also the discursive practices through which anti-corruption is legitimised within transnational and practitioner communities.

4.3. *Analytical procedure*

All material analysed was publicly accessible and handled in accordance with ethical guidance for digital trace research (Markham and Buchanan 2012). Analysis proceeded through iterative qualitative coding combining deductive and inductive strategies (Braun and Clarke 2006). Initial coding identified recurring symbols, metaphors, narrative roles and calls to action. Subsequent cycles applied the theoretical framework to examine anchoring and objectification (Joffe 2003; Moscovici 2000), moral framing and narrative sequencing (Bruner 1986; Riessman 2008).

An adapted Proppian Quest Arc (Need → Go → Search → Find → Return → Change) was used as an interpretive coding framework to analyse narrative progression. Each text was examined to assess whether and how these stages were present, partially present, or absent. Coding did not assume a fixed or linear structure. Rather, the framework was applied heuristically to identify whether narratives progressed beyond exposure (Need/Search) toward resolution and transformation (Return/Change). Attention was given to points of narrative stalling, where texts emphasised investigation or procedural activity without corresponding evidence of outcome or consequence. This approach enabled systematic examination of variation in narrative momentum across cases.

5. Findings: The social life of anti-corruption narratives

5.1. *Dominant symbolic and narrative motifs*

Across the Sub-Saharan dataset, anti-corruption is publicly constructed not simply as a technical response to institutional failure, but as a defence of democratic accountability articulated through shared symbols, metaphors and narrative structures. Anchoring and objectification stabilise common-sense understandings of what corruption is, who bears responsibility and what forms of action against it are legitimate (Joffe 2003; Moscovici 2000). These processes are visible across media reporting, digital practitioner commentary and campaign artefacts, though their sequencing and symbolic emphasis vary across contexts. South Africa emerges not as an exception in representational form, but as a symbolically dense case in which procedural visibility, most notably through the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (the Zondo Commission), often substitutes for narrative closure, while in other Sub-Saharan contexts, outcome visibility is more prominent.

The six representations were retained because they occurred consistently across the corpus, functioned as socially shared interpretive resources and demonstrated clear evidence of both anchoring and objectification. First, each appeared consistently across multiple texts within the documentary corpus, spanning news media, civil society campaign artefacts and digital commentary. Second, each functioned as a shared interpretive resource through which anti-corruption was explained, justified, criticised or imagined. Third, each demonstrated evidence of both anchoring and objectification. Across the corpus, anti-corruption was repeatedly anchored in familiar moral concepts like fairness, responsibility, justice, transparency and collective responsibility, while these meanings were objectified through tangible symbols, institutions, campaign artefacts, legal processes and public events. The resulting representations, therefore, extend beyond descriptive themes to constitute shared systems of meaning through which accountability is understood and communicated.

In addition to identifying anchoring and objectification, each representation was analysed as a socially shared system of meaning by examining five interrelated dimensions: (1) what anti-corruption is represented as; (2) the moral logic through which the representation is anchored; (3) the symbols, practices and institutions through which it is objectified; (4) the positioning of social actors within the representation; and (5) the tensions and contradictions through which the representation is negotiated. This analytical structure reflects the central concern of SRT with how societies collectively construct and sustain shared understandings of complex social phenomena.

Collective Responsibility – Across Sub-Saharan Africa, anti-corruption is consistently anchored in collective moral obligation through direct address to citizens. A campaign poster produced by the Anti-Corruption Coalition Uganda (ACCU) to mark International Anti-Corruption Day (9 December 2023) asks, ‘What should be done to end corruption in Uganda?’ (CA-02)². The open-ended phrasing positions the public as responsible moral agents rather than passive recipients of reform. This representation anchors anti-corruption within collective responsibility, through which anti-corruption is understood as a shared civic obligation rather than the responsibility of government alone. This representation is objectified through community meetings, campaign posters, partnership agreements, public consultations and collaborative advocacy initiatives that render collective accountability visible. The following examples illustrate how these

² Document identifiers (e.g. CA = campaign artefact; NE = news article; LK = LinkedIn post) refer to items in the documentary corpus and correspond to the full source details listed in Appendix A. As these materials comprise the study’s primary dataset, document identifiers are used in place of conventional page reference.

symbolic resources communicate coalition-building as both a practical and moral response to corruption. Campaign materials from across the region reinforce this framing by linking corruption to public loss and institutional failure. For example, the Government of Uganda's National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2019/20–2023/24 Assessment Report and the Prevalence of Corruption 2022/2023 report (CA-05) emphasise rebuilding ethics, integrity and public accountability rather than relying on a single campaign slogan. Here, anti-corruption is objectified through concrete social and institutional consequences, anchoring responsibility in communal harm rather than abstract institutional failure. In South Africa, collective responsibility is articulated through professional and institutional identity rather than mass mobilisation. LinkedIn commentary states explicitly that 'it is everyone's responsibility to stand up for *#anticorruption*' (LK-16). However, the placement of this claim within professional narrative re-anchors collective duty within organisational roles, ethical leadership and institutional conduct rather than popular mobilisation.

Everyday Accountability – Across the region's media reporting, accountability is objectified as an ongoing institutional process. News coverage highlights the establishment of coordinated anti-corruption mechanisms and enforcement structures, for example, through multi-agency task forces and institutional coordination frameworks categorised as sustained efforts to combat corruption in Kenya (NE-02; NE-03). These formulations normalise oversight as continuous and procedural, anchoring accountability in institutional practice rather than exceptional intervention. This familiar expectation of routine oversight is objectified through references to task forces, investigative mechanisms, and public declarations of impartial enforcement. In South Africa and comparable contexts, this representation is reinforced through declarative procedural signalling of enforcement intent. The assertion in Kenya that 'there will be no sacred cows' (NE-02) objectifies accountability through the promise of impartial enforcement, anchoring reform in institutional resolve rather than episodic action.

Justice Through Law – Rights-based accountability appears across the dataset where judicial authority is invoked. Reporting emphasises the role of courts in constraining executive action, with coverage noting that a High Court in Kenya 'issued conservatory orders' halting executive implementation of an anti-corruption taskforce (NE-04). Public understanding is organised around constitutional equality before the law, through which accountability is understood as a legal, rather than political obligation. This representation is objectified through court judgments, conservatory orders, constitutional provisions and judicial institutions that render legal accountability publicly visible. Similarly, law-enforcement narratives reinforce this framing through statements in Nigeria like 'no one is above the law' (NE-01), which objectify accountability through legal equality and procedural fairness.

Civic Courage – Across the region, whistleblowing and exposure are positioned as critical mechanisms of accountability. Reporting and commentary highlight the importance of citizen reporting, investigative journalism and institutional tip-off systems, for example, where anti-corruption efforts are described as operating 'one tip-off at a time' in uncovering fraud and procurement irregularities in South Africa (NE-09). In parallel, LinkedIn discourse reflects growing scepticism about the effectiveness of these mechanisms in the absence of systemic follow-through. Posts referencing repeated investigations and limited outcomes emphasise frustration with performative accountability processes, with commentary questioning whether investigations translate into substantive change (LK-12). This reframes whistleblowing as necessary, but insufficient without institutional responsiveness. The familiar moral category is civic courage, in which citizens are understood to have a moral responsibility to expose wrongdoing despite personal risk. This representation is objectified through whistleblower hotlines, investigative journalism, reporting mechanisms, and documented investigations that transform moral obligation into visible public action.

Tangible Accountability – Completed enforcement actions operate as symbolic proof points across Sub-Saharan Africa. Media coverage highlights measurable outcomes like asset recovery and investigations, for example, reporting that anti-corruption bodies have recovered significant financial resources through measurable outcomes including 'GH¢128 million in assets and cash recovered or preserved' in Ghana (NE-07). These figures objectify accountability through quantifiable outcomes, anchoring reform in visible consequences. This representation anchors anti-corruption in the expectation that accountability should produce tangible consequences. Rather than valuing procedural compliance alone, participants associated successful anti-corruption with visible evidence that wrongdoing had resulted in sanctions, recovery or institutional reform. This representation is objectified through recovered assets, prosecutions, public reports, financial recoveries and other observable outcomes that render institutional effectiveness visible. In contrast, where these outcomes are absent or contested, narratives rely more heavily on procedural assurances and institutional commitments to sustain public trust.

Ethical Renewal – Regional campaign materials project reform into aspirational futures through normative and value-based messaging. Rather than explicitly invoking a single phrase like 'a future without corruption', artefacts emphasise ethical transformation and integrity. For example, the 2021 International Anti-Corruption Day campaign poster produced by Ethiopian federal anti-corruption

institutions and partner organisations promotes the theme ‘Ethical Leadership for Corruption-Free Ethiopia’ (CA-06), while the policy paper by Chemonges (n.d.), ‘Striving for Integrity: Addressing Institutional Redundancy in Uganda’s Fight Against Corruption’ (CA-07) similarly frames integrity as the foundation for institutional renewal. These materials anchor present action in a projected transformation of governance systems. In South Africa, future-oriented narratives are more cautious, with commentary emphasising gradual reform and institutional rebuilding rather than immediate transformation, signalling a shift from promised change to conditional and incremental progress. Public understanding is organised around ethical renewal, through which anti-corruption is understood as a pathway towards a more just and accountable society. This representation is objectified through campaign slogans, aspirational messaging, public commitments, integrity pledges and reform narratives that make alternative governance futures imaginable.

Importantly, these representations do not operate in isolation. They interact to form a coherent narrative ecosystem in which moral obligation, procedural action and anticipated outcomes are mutually reinforcing. For example, collective responsibility gains traction when supported by tangible accountability, while civic courage narratives depend on the expectation that institutional systems will respond. Where these elements align, anti-corruption narratives generate a sense of coherence and plausibility. Where they diverge, for instance, when strong moral appeals are not matched by tangible accountability, narratives risk producing dissonance, contributing to public scepticism and disengagement.

These representations also illustrate cognitive polyphasia. Participants simultaneously expressed strong normative commitments to democratic accountability while recognising political capture, institutional weakness and uneven implementation. Rather than undermining the representations, these tensions reveal how competing understandings of governance coexist within everyday common-sense reasoning about corruption and reform.

Collectively, the Sub-Saharan dataset demonstrates that anti-corruption circulates through six recurring social representations. South Africa does not diverge from these representations, but re-weights them, with the Zondo Commission operating as a central symbolic anchor that intensifies procedural visibility while exposing the limits of narrative closure. This comparative pattern strengthens the explanatory power of SRT by showing how shared representational forms are locally re-anchored and differentially objectified across governance contexts. The documentary component of the study identifies six dominant social representations of public anti-corruption narratives across civic, media and digital commentary in Sub-Saharan Africa, which are anchored in everyday moral categories and objectified through symbols, binaries and narrative protagonists that render anti-corruption intelligible and actionable within public-facing civic narratives.

5.2. *Narrative effects on governance imaginaries*

Whereas SRT explains how anti-corruption becomes socially meaningful, NT explains how these meanings are organised into stories that distribute agency, establish causality and shape expectations of accountability. Across the corpus, narratives consistently positioned protagonists, antagonists and institutional actors within recurring moral sequences that moved, or failed to move, from exposure towards consequence. NT therefore contributes more than thematic description by revealing how anti-corruption stories generate, sustain or undermine expectations of democratic accountability. While these effects are visible across contexts, their narrative expression differs markedly between South Africa and other Sub-Saharan cases, particularly in how accountability is made visible and how reform trajectories are imagined.

These differences are not merely stylistic but reflect deeper variations in how institutional credibility is constructed and sustained. In contexts where enforcement outcomes are visible and regularly communicated, narratives reinforce a causal link between wrongdoing and consequence. In contrast, where procedural visibility dominates without corresponding outcome confirmation, narratives tend to emphasise process legitimacy while deferring judgement on effectiveness. This distinction is critical, as it shapes whether publics interpret governance systems as functioning, even if imperfectly, or as symbolically active, but substantively ineffective.

Trust-building through visible consequence – Trust is most strongly reinforced where anti-corruption narratives foreground credible signals of enforcement and accountability, whether through outcomes or authoritative institutional action. In several Sub-Saharan contexts, media reporting links accountability to demonstrable institutional commitment and coordination. For example, in Ghana, a news report emphasises the importance of institutional independence in sustaining accountability, highlighting that ‘strong institutions... must be given real independence’ (NE-08), framing enforcement as dependent on credible and autonomous governance structures. Similarly, narratives of accountability are reinforced through regional cooperation and collective commitment, like a news report on the Southern African Development Community’s (SADC) commemoration of two decades of regional anti-corruption cooperation and the strengthening of legal and institutional frameworks across member states (NE-11). These formulations objectify accountability by

presenting it as embedded within durable institutional arrangements, providing audiences with reasons to believe that governance systems can enforce integrity over time. Trust-building is further reinforced through symbolic representations that make institutional performance publicly visible. For example, the International Governance Institute's (IGI) 2022 Cameroon Country Report (CA-10) documents integrity education, citizen monitoring initiatives, public-sector capacity building and multi-stakeholder partnerships, reporting that more than 16,000 lives have been influenced to live and work with integrity. By presenting measurable programme outputs and institutional achievements, the report objectifies accountability through visible evidence of implementation rather than aspiration alone. These representations translate abstract commitments into observable governance practices that can reinforce public confidence in institutional integrity. They translate abstract institutional commitments into recognisable signals of intent to reform. By contrast, where enforcement outcomes are less visible, trust is constructed through assertions of institutional intent and reform orientation rather than demonstrable consequence, resulting in confidence that remains conditional on future proof of effectiveness. The familiar moral category is that legitimate institutions act fairly and consistently. This expectation is objectified through visible institutional arrangements, enforcement actions and public commitments that provide tangible evidence of accountability.

Participation through moral identification – Participation across Sub-Saharan Africa is frequently encouraged through moral appeals that position citizens as necessary actors in reform. Campaign messaging explicitly links civic responsibility to anti-corruption action through public awareness campaigns and engagement initiatives that frame integrity as a shared societal responsibility. For example, the 2024 Zambia Anti-Corruption Conference on the Extractives Sector, organised by Transparency International Zambia and the Chandler Foundation, encouraged collective engagement by bringing together government, civil society, the private sector and development partners to strengthen integrity and accountability within the extractives industry (CA-08). These forms of moral address transform anti-corruption from an institutional mandate into a collective civic obligation, encouraging individuals to see themselves as participants in governance reform. These appeals operate by converting grievance into moral responsibility and positioning citizens as co-producers of accountability. In South Africa and across professionalised contexts, participation is more often articulated through institutional and professional identity than through mass mobilisation. LinkedIn commentary frames participation through support for investigative journalism and institutional accountability, emphasising the importance of reporting that 'shine[s] a light on stories that hold power to account' (LK-21). Here, participation is anchored in professional norms, transparency and accountability practices rather than public protest or campaign activism, reinforcing a more institutionalised form of civic engagement.

Advocacy through symbolic portability – Across the dataset, advocacy gains traction through symbolically portable artefacts that condense complex governance claims into shareable cues. Campaign material frequently uses visual metaphors and simplified messages to communicate corruption's effects and required responses. For example, the 'What Kills Corruption?' campaign poster developed through the International Governance Institute (IGI), FITCAM and the University of Buea in Cameroon depicts corruption as a cockroach to be eliminated, transforming an abstract governance problem into a familiar visual metaphor that communicates the need for integrity and collective action (CA-01). These representations translate complex governance failures into tangible and emotionally resonant symbols that can circulate across community spaces and media platforms. By contrast, digital advocacy relies less on emotive symbolism and more on institutional and evidentiary framing. LinkedIn posts consistently emphasise accountability through oversight, transparency and adherence to professional and legal standards (LK-26), rather than through condensed symbolic messaging. These narratives foreground due process, institutional integrity and evidence-based reform, positioning advocacy within professional and policy-oriented discourse. As a result, while these narratives travel effectively within digital practitioner networks, they are less symbolically condensed and therefore less portable across broader civic audiences than campaign artefacts.

Narrative momentum and stalling – Using the adapted Proppian narrative structure, Sub-Saharan artefacts that foreground completed enforcement more readily progress towards narrative closure. Media reporting that confirms enforcement outcomes enables audiences to imagine the stages of Return and Change, reinforcing the plausibility of reform through visible institutional follow-through. By contrast, narratives that emphasise legal contestation or procedural delay tend to stall before these final stages. Across the dataset, reporting frequently highlights ongoing investigations, institutional review processes and unresolved legal proceedings, like NE-15 in Kenya and LK-19 in Ghana, without confirming substantive outcomes. While this language signals institutional activity, it suspends narrative resolution. Exposure and investigation dominate the narrative, yet the absence of visible consequence weakens momentum, leaving accountability framed as an ongoing process rather than an achieved outcome.

Drawing on the documentary corpus, this analysis contributes to answering RQ2 by demonstrating how public-facing narratives frame trust-building, participatory governance and advocacy within anti-corruption initiatives. The campaign artefacts analysed, from

the Ethiopian International Anti-Corruption Day campaign, the Zambian Anti-Corruption Conference materials and the Cameroonian What Kills Corruption? Poster, illustrate how visual and symbolic communication complements institutional discourse by making integrity, accountability and civic responsibility publicly visible. While these narrative mechanisms do not replace legal or institutional reform, they shape how governance is interpreted across contexts, as credible and consequential, or as procedurally active yet substantively unresolved, an interpretive dimension central to democratic accountability (Alexander 2006; Persson et al. 2013; Polletta 2006).

6. Discussion: Implications for governance and anti-corruption practice

The findings demonstrate that anti-corruption operates simultaneously as an institutional practice and as a socially shared system of meaning. Across the corpus, accountability was represented not simply through governance mechanisms themselves but through the symbolic meanings attached to those mechanisms. Courts, investigative agencies, community meetings, journalists, whistleblowers and campaign artefacts functioned as objectifications through which abstract moral ideas about justice, fairness, responsibility and democratic accountability became publicly recognisable. This distinction is central to SRT because the study explains not governance institutions themselves but the shared meanings through which those institutions become socially intelligible.

However, building on the findings, the study demonstrates that anti-corruption operates not only as an institutional field, but as a narrative and symbolic arena in which democratic accountability is rendered credible or hollow through public meanings. Narrative analysis brings these upstream conditions of legitimacy into view, revealing the metaphors, icons, moral binaries and protagonist roles through which anti-corruption becomes common sense (Joffe 2003; Moscovici 2008; Polletta 2006). From a collective-action perspective, these representations shape expectations of reciprocity, fairness and enforcement, which in turn shape whether anti-corruption is experienced as a shared civic project or dismissed as performative politics (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Persson et al. 2013; Rothstein and Varraich 2017).

The findings also extend ongoing debates about the limits of technocratic anti-corruption approaches. By demonstrating how narrative coherence and symbolic visibility condition the perceived effectiveness of reform, the study highlights the importance of aligning institutional action with communication strategy. Anti-corruption interventions that fail to produce or communicate intelligible outcomes risk being interpreted as performative, regardless of their technical merits. Conversely, even incremental reforms can gain legitimacy when embedded within narratives that clearly link action to consequence. This emphasises the need for a more integrated approach that considers institutional design and narrative construction as mutually constitutive elements of governance reform.

More broadly, the findings qualify that narratives should not be viewed merely as communication tools that accompany governance reform. Rather, they function as part of the interpretive infrastructure through which governance itself becomes publicly intelligible. Institutions derive legitimacy not only from their formal authority or legal mandate, but also from the stories, symbols and collective expectations that enable citizens to recognise institutional actions as credible, fair and consequential. From this perspective, narratives that stall before reaching resolution represent more than a communication problem. They constitute a governance challenge, because they weaken the shared interpretive frameworks through which accountability is recognised, legitimised and sustained.

The Proppian heuristic proved particularly useful in identifying points of narrative stalling, where exposure did not translate into consequence. A central implication is the strategic importance of symbolic beacons and positive outliers. Across the corpus, these frequently appear as portable icons and symbolic cues (anti-corruption slogans, visual metaphors of corruption as a destructive force and integrity-based messaging), moral protagonists (whistleblowers, investigative journalists, reform-oriented actors) and outcome signals (asset recovery, prosecutions and enforcement actions). These elements counter fatalistic narratives of impunity by supplying concrete story components that populate the Return and Change stages of the adapted Proppian narrative structure, preventing narratives from stalling at exposure without resolution (Miller 2012; Propp 1968; Riessman 2008).

In South Africa's post-state capture context, moral clarity co-exists with deep cynicism. Despite the revelatory force of the Zondo Commission, the absence of sustained visible prosecutions, institutional repair, protected whistleblowing and credible transparency mechanisms has limited the restoration of civic efficacy and trust (Rothstein and Varraich 2017; Shamsuddin 2023). These dynamics echo scholarship on state capture, which shows that accountability often fails not at the level of exposure, but at the stage of narrative consolidation, where revelations must translate into consequences that restore moral and institutional order. David-Barrett's (2025) analysis of strategically divisive narratives further demonstrates how polarisation and identity-based framing can neutralise accountability by recasting institutional scrutiny as partisan attack rather than democratic defence. In contrast, the anti-corruption narratives identified in this study seek to counter these divisive dynamics by foregrounding procedural visibility, institutional action, and concrete proof points of enforcement. Whether these counter-narratives can sustain reform momentum ultimately depends on their capacity to populate the Return

and Change stages of the governance narrative arc, where exposure is followed by demonstrable consequence and normative restoration. This demonstrates the value of narrative sequencing as an analytical lens for diagnosing gaps between exposure and accountability in governance systems.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that anti-corruption strategies should be designed with public meaning in mind. Communicating intelligible outcomes, narrating procedural fairness, and clarifying reform sequences can stabilise expectations that enforcement is impartial and participation rational (Fox 2015; Persson et al. 2013). For civil society and media actors, narrative governance offers a practical repertoire, linking moral appeals to concrete participation pathways while avoiding oversimplified binaries that risk reinforcing cynicism when promised change fails to materialise (Entman 2007; Polletta 2006). Strengthening democratic promise requires not only stronger institutions, but credible, plural and outcome-linked narratives that keep reform imaginable while remaining alert to manipulation and anti-corruption theatre (Alexander 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015).

7. Conclusion

This study has argued that anti-corruption is best understood not simply as an institutional or legal endeavour but as a socially shared system of meaning through which democratic accountability is imagined, communicated and enacted. By integrating SRT with NT, the analysis demonstrates that public understandings of anti-corruption are organised around six recurring representations: Collective Responsibility, Everyday Accountability, Justice through Law, Civic Courage, Tangible Accountability and Ethical Renewal. Together these representations provide common interpretive resources through which citizens, practitioners and institutions make sense of corruption, assign responsibility, negotiate legitimacy and imagine governance reform.

While laws and enforcement remain indispensable, their effectiveness is mediated by the credibility of narratives. Reforms gain traction when institutional action is rendered visible through intelligible stories of process and outcome, and when abstract principles like integrity are anchored in everyday moral reasoning. By contrast, narratives that stall at exposure without resolution weaken trust, even where formal reforms exist. South African cases are especially instructive, illustrating how prolonged gaps between revelation and consequence can undermine democratic promise despite strong constitutional frameworks.

The findings emphasise the importance of integrating narrative and cultural analysis into governance research and practice. Effective anti-corruption strategies must attend to meaning-making alongside institutional design, cultivating visible outcomes, credible symbolic beacons and participatory pathways that sustain reform momentum. Future research could extend this analysis by examining how these narrative dynamics evolve, particularly in response to major governance events, policy shifts or high-profile corruption cases. Longitudinal analysis would provide further insight into how narrative momentum is sustained or disrupted, and how shifts in symbolic representation correspond to changes in public trust and institutional legitimacy. Additionally, comparative work across the BRICS countries could illuminate whether similar narrative patterns emerge in other governance contexts or whether distinct representational logics prevail.

As one component of a broader multi-method doctoral study, the documentary corpus demonstrates how public narratives contribute to the social construction of anti-corruption across Sub-Saharan Africa. Together, these strands will contribute to a richer understanding of how anti-corruption is socially represented, enacted and contested across Sub-Saharan Africa.

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Appendix A

Source_ID	Media_Type	Outlet/Author	Country/Region	Date	URL_or_Reference	Headline/Title
CA-01	Campaign	IGI/FITCAM with University of Buea	Cameroon	2011/01/01	IGI (International Governance Institute), FITCAM, and University of Buea. 2011. What Kills Corruption? Campaign poster. University of Buea Integrity and Anti-Corruption Support Project, Cameroon.	What kills corruption? (Poster)
CA-02	Campaign	Anti-Corruption Coalition Uganda (ACCU)	Uganda	2023/12/09	Anti-Corruption Coalition Uganda (ACCU). 2023. International Anti-Corruption Day: What Should Be Done to End Corruption in Uganda? Campaign poster, December 9, 2023.	International Anti-Corruption Day: What should be done to end corruption in Uganda?
CA-03	Campaign	AminArts (editorial cartoon)	Somalia	n.d.	AminArts (Amin Amir). n.d. Elite Profiteering from Famine. Editorial cartoon, Somalia.	Cartoon: elite profiteering from famine
CA-04	Campaign	Editorial cartoon (attributed to Nigerian context)	Nigeria	n.d.	Anonymous. n.d. No Funding for Police Operations. Editorial cartoon, Nigeria.	Cartoon: “No funding for police operations”
CA-05	Campaign	Government of Uganda	Uganda	2023/11/01	Government of Uganda. 2023. National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2019/20–2023/24 Assessment Report; Prevalence of Corruption 2022/2023. Kampala: Government of Uganda.	NACS 2019/20–2023/24; Assessment Report; Prevalence of Corruption 2022/2023
CA-06	Campaign	Ethiopia Federal bodies & partners (IAC Day poster)	Ethiopia	2021/12/09	Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (Ethiopia) and partner institutions. 2021. Ethical Leadership for Corruption-Free Ethiopia. International Anti-Corruption Day campaign poster, December 9, 2021.	Ethical Leadership for Corruption-Free Ethiopia
CA-07	Campaign	Chemonges, Timothy M., (Policy paper)	Uganda	n.d.	Chemonges, Timothy M., n.d. Striving for Integrity: Addressing Institutional Redundancy in Uganda’s Fight Against Corruption. Policy Paper.	Policy Paper: “Striving for Integrity: Addressing institutional redundancy in Uganda’s Fight Against Corruption”
CA-08	Campaign	Transparency International Zambia; Chandler Foundation	Zambia	2024/11/26	Transparency International Zambia and Chandler Foundation. 2024. 2024 Zambia Anti-Corruption Conference (Extractives). Conference campaign materials, November 26, 2024.	2024 Zambia Anti-Corruption Conference (Extractives)
CA-09	Campaign	IMF/World Bank Annual Meetings (with R. Lifuka et al.)	Global	2022/10/11	Lifuka, Reuben, et al. 2022. Unmasking Control: Beneficial Ownership Transparency. IMF–World Bank Annual Meetings side event, Washington, DC, October 11, 2022	Unmasking Control: Beneficial Ownership Transparency
CA-10	Campaign	International Governance Institute (IGI) Cameroon	Cameroon	2022/12/31	International Governance Institute (IGI). 2022. 2022 Cameroon Country Report. Yaoundé: International Governance Institute.	2022 Cameroon Country Report (IGI)

Source_ID	Media_Type	Outlet/Author	Country/Region	Date	URL_or_Reference	Headline/Title
LK-01	LinkedIn	Christophe Kouamé	Côte d'Ivoire	2023/09/20	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/christophe-kouame-87759758_localelected-activity-7112167811585556481-L35e/	Local elected officials: after your brilliant election, the time has come to declare your assets
LK-02	LinkedIn	Daniel Eriksson	Madagascar	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/erikssond_madagascar-activity-7212406195213471744-Cs_V/	Spotlight on corruption in Madagascar – interview share
LK-03	LinkedIn	W.K. Adeniyi	Nigeria	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/w-k-adeniyi-a16152130_the-intervlog-channel-an-international-activity-7204875966056189952-MveD/	Applauding reps who reject luxury SUVs
LK-04	LinkedIn	Maria Ndapandula Nambahu	Namibia	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/maria-ndapandula-nambahu-705303142_nogc2024-owncontent-activity-7232412461461585921-tvgd/	Transparency in Namibia's oil & gas – lessons from Fishrot
LK-05	LinkedIn	Aideen Gilmore	Rwanda	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/aideen-gilmore-102a9150_thanks-for-hosting-us-ti-rwanda-activity-7302429909119827968-XYSp/	Workshop with TI-Rwanda on open & accountable budgeting
LK-06	LinkedIn	Jean Claude Agbortem	Cameroon	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/agbortemobi_barrister-akere-muna-a-fearless-advocate-activity-7239284041638658048-0bih/	Akere Muna – fearless anti-corruption advocate
LK-07	LinkedIn	Alioune Camara	Senegal	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/aliounec_fmi-pour-les-blancs-fmi-pour-les-noirs-activity-7340117508365996032-R34A/	IMF fairness & Senegal's reforms – debate post
LK-08	LinkedIn	Jeffrey Yates	Liberia	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jeffrey-n-yates-mba-cfe-cfip-b376663b_national-liberia-current-activity-7291200170770268160-yj19/	National Integrity Forum actions on fees transparency
LK-09	LinkedIn	Bright Simons	Ghana	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/bright-simons-1390432_1-the-former-boss-of-ghanas-fuels-market-activity-7352011999943286785-PG8b/	Why detailed narratives matter in OSP prosecutions
LK-10	LinkedIn	Zoe Leoudaki	Ghana	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/zoe-leoudaki-7b59a810_ghana-votes-for-change-activity-7273675696655253504-0JUW/	Ghana votes for change – will new president curb corruption?
LK-11	LinkedIn	Emmanuel K. Bensah Jr.	Ghana/AU	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ekbensah_for-immediate-release-hon-kwami-edem-senanu-activity-7056677352403030016-f8oU/	Press release: Ghanaian sworn to AU Advisory Board Against Corruption
LK-12	LinkedIn	'Fisayo Soyombo	Nigeria	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/fisayo-soyombo-04376630_i-read-that-interior-minister-olubunmi-tunji-ojo-activity-7245098405583048706-IIIF/	'It's all cruise'—on performative prison 'investigations'
LK-13	LinkedIn	Auwal Sani	Nigeria	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/auwal-sani-5a1853b7_policy-conversation-on-anti-corruption-crusade-activity-7277727877888962560-X4qZ/	Policy conversation on anti-corruption—key takeaways

Source_ID	Media_Type	Outlet/Author	Country/Region	Date	URL_or_Reference	Headline/Title
LK-14	LinkedIn	Olanrewaju Suraju/HEDA	Nigeria	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/olanrewaju-suraju-0807143_the-rate-of-corruption-at-the-sub-national-activity-7204093993587015680-7Ynj/	HEDA Space: corruption at sub-national level
LK-15	LinkedIn	Gabriel Ani	Nigeria	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/gabrielanijr_judicial-corruption-undermining-nigerias-activity-7354201047151632385-Ro41/	CISLAC: judicial corruption undermines anti-graft fight
LK-16	LinkedIn	Hamzat Lawal	Nigeria	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/hamzat-lawal-85409129_anticorruption-activity-6967932639085236224-9VIy/	Stand up for #anticorruption (Hausa video)
LK-17	LinkedIn	Søren Vester Haldrup	East & Southern Africa	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/s%C3%B8ren-vester-haldrup-87159a57_call-for-proposals-activity-7351594583950016515-zdvX/	Call for proposals: civil society vs illicit financial flows
LK-18	LinkedIn	Kavisha Pillay	South Africa	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/kavisha-pillay-44745b61_why-does-it-still-feel-as-if-were-losing-activity-7049456608996659200-GvR2/	Integrity is the antidote we need
LK-19	LinkedIn	Heather Marquette	Ghana	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/heather-marquette-1331903_policing-corruption-or-corrupted-policing-activity-7283064351916195841-VErS/	Policing corruption or corrupted policing? New paper
LK-20	LinkedIn	Wayne Duvenage	South Africa	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/wayneduvenage_south-africa-must-substantially-intensify-activity-7245275029259665408-7sDr/	South Africa must intensify the fight against corruption
LK-21	LinkedIn	Steven Zwane/ Absa Group	Pan-Africa	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/steventotiezwane_absa-yourstorymatters-activity-7258752287001509889-WvR7/	Saluting investigative journalists – Absa x Wits CJ
LK-22	LinkedIn	Kabwe Chongo	Zambia	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/kabwe-chongo-k-55472112a_chapteronefoundation-cofzambia-activity-7034535585503428608-aAoz/	Chapter One Foundation: standing for constitutionalism
LK-23	LinkedIn	Nicodemus Minde	Tanzania	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/nicodemus-minde-50583657_why-is-samia-struggling-to-sustain-reforms-activity-7233371959042990080-r5Sa/	Why is Samia struggling to sustain reforms?
LK-24	LinkedIn	Mpoki Thomson	Tanzania	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/mpoki-thomson-4482514a_will-tanzania-rejoin-the-ogp-tanzania-initially-activity-7284159480156622848-ab3m/	Will Tanzania rejoin the OGP?
LK-25	LinkedIn	Janet Ngombalu	Kenya	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/janet-ngombalu-7b423726_transparency-taxpayers-publicfinance-activity-7312475597622972416-Iqu2/	Transparency for taxpayers in public finance
LK-26	LinkedIn	Samuel Kariuki Gitonga	Kenya	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/samuel-kariuki-gitonga-98274b10b_justiceforboniface-stoppoliticalpersecution-activity-7353735634856960000-sbVw/	#JusticeForBoniface – due process concerns

Source_ID	Media_Type	Outlet/Author	Country/Region	Date	URL_or_Reference	Headline/Title
LK-27	LinkedIn	Pamela Laourou	Ghana (focus)	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/pamela-laourou-00a701180_flashbackfriday-activity-7356977645252751362-3fd2	Reclaiming stolen wealth & rebuilding trust
LK-28	LinkedIn	Geraldine A. Itana	Namibia	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/geraldine-a-itana-057543a7_goodgovernance-ethicaleadership-anticorruption-activity-7364361762764210176-z0k6	ACC/UNDP ethics workshops – onwards and upwards
LK-29	LinkedIn	Andrew Page Wood (sharing Oladele Dosunmu)	PanAfrica/UK history	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/andrew-page-wood-34384bb_oladelethoughts-africa-africadiaspora-activity-7363808755337019392-TXeh	The silent robbery—Britain's wealth & colonial loot
LK-30	LinkedIn	Maurice Nyamunga	Pan-Africa	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/maurice-nyamunga-01096872_an-open-letter-to-leaders-stop-the-rot-of-activity-7364751532514332672-G3H6	Open letter to leaders: stop the rot
LK-31	LinkedIn	Terence M. Yhip	Senegal (comparative)	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/terence-m-yhip-066244121_senegal-president-exempts-himself-from-new-activity-7361971303051898880-tJNH/	Asset declaration debate & 'tone at the top'
LK-32	LinkedIn	Dina Boyele K.	—	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/activity-7363477842644320258-KpvK/	Why corruption awareness can be a matter of survival
LK-33	LinkedIn	Grace Van Niekerk (UWC Law Librarian)	Brazil (lessons)/SA audience	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/grace-van-niekerk-uwclaw-librarian-1608a755_the-fight-against-systemic-corruption-activity-7361365690508894208-drVG/	The Fight Against Systemic Corruption—Lessons from Brazil
LK-34	LinkedIn	Uven Moodley	South Africa	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/uvnmoodley_r25k-to-buy-a-teaching-job-probe-to-flush-activity-7363467986520727553-DUzc/	R25k to buy a teaching job? Ghost teachers probe
LK-35	LinkedIn	Juliet Etefe	Ghana	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/juliet-etefe-1a1b54187_amend-anti-corruption-laws-to-close-loopholes-activity-7363728376353771520-knii/	Amend anti-corruption laws to close loopholes
LK-36	LinkedIn	Nwichi Daniel Ikechukwu	Nigeria	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/nwichidaniel_anti-corruption-an-indispensable-value-for-activity-7362404811830345728-Smke/	Anticorruption: an indispensable value for growth
LK-37	LinkedIn	Samuel Tadesse	Ethiopia (Addis Ababa)	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/samuel-tadesse-31256a35b_goodgovernance-transparency-publicfinance-activity-7363444431422636032-1wMU/	Addis bans gov't meetings in hotels—antiwaste step
LK-38	LinkedIn	Farhia Noor	PanAfrica	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/farhia-noor-7a127b263_presidenthilema-presidentruto-presidentramaphosa-activity-7364598447326248962-Tr5S/	Africa's one currency dream? Not yet—fix institutions first
LK-39	LinkedIn	Dr. Etuka C. Obinwa	Sudan/ South Sudan (comparative)	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/dr-etuka-c-obinwa-ph-d-978ab013_why-is-sudan-ranked-the-most-corrupt-country-activity-7362542588496613377-nTl_	Why is Sudan ranked the most corrupt country?

Source_ID	Media_Type	Outlet/Author	Country/Region	Date	URL_or_Reference	Headline/Title
LK-40	LinkedIn	David Barnard	PanAfrica	n.d.	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/davidbarnardza_internationalanticorruptionday-unitedagainstcorruption-activity-7271805596448796672-yed_	International AntiCorruption Day—24 African NGOs
NE-01	News	Sahara Reporters	Nigeria	2025-08-23	https://saharareporters.com/2025/08/23/tinubu-government-warns-atiku-no-one-above-law-backs-efcc-manhunt-son-law-abdullahi	Tinubu Government Warns Atiku ‘No One Above The Law’, Backs EFCC Manhunt For Son-In-Law Abdullahi Haske
NE-02	News	The Star (Kenya)/Felix Kipkemoi	Kenya	2025-08-19	https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2025-08-19-ruto-establishes-team-to-spearhead-war-on-corruption	Ruto establishes multi-agency team to spearhead war on corruption
NE-03	News	The Standard (Kenya)/Mike Kihaki	Kenya	2025-08-19	https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001527251/judge-and-jury-ruto-forms-multi-agency-team-to-fight-corruption	Judge and jury? Ruto forms multi-agency team to fight corruption
NE-04	News	The Standard (Kenya)/Daniel Chege	Kenya	2025-08-20	https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001527320/court-halts-operations-of-ruto-anti-corruption-team	Blow to Ruto as court halts operations of multi-agency team on graft
NE-05	News	Nairobi Law Monthly/Samuel Njihia	Kenya	2025-08-20	https://nairobilawmonthly.com/court-grounds-rutos-anti-graft-taskforce/	Court grounds Ruto’s anti-graft taskforce over ‘imaginary powers’
NE-06	News	Ghana Broadcasting Corporation/Henrietta Afful	Ghana	2025-08-19	https://www.gbcghanaonline.com/general/osp-remains-ghanas-best-instrument-in-fight-against-corruption-osp-2025-half-year-report/2025/	OSP remains Ghana’s best instrument in fight against corruption – OSP 2025 Half-Year Report
NE-07	News	Ghana Broadcasting Corporation/Seli Baisie (by Spendilove Incoom)	Ghana	2025-08-19	https://www.gbcghanaonline.com/general/osp-half-year-report-shows-gh%C2%A2128m-recovered-in-anti-corruption-drive/2025/	OSP half-year report shows GH¢128m recovered in anti-corruption drive
NE-08	News	Vanguard (Nigeria)/Reported remarks by Nana Akufo-Addo	Ghana/Africa	2025-08-18	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/08/corruption-remains-africas-biggest-governance-challenge-akufo-addo/	Corruption remains Africa’s biggest governance challenge – Akufo-Addo
NE-09	News	Daily Maverick/Estelle Ellis	South Africa	2025-08-23	https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-08-23-national-health-laboratory-service-busting-corruption-one-tip-off-at-a-time/	National Health Laboratory Service – busting corruption one tip-off at a time
NE-10	News	Nation (Kenya)	Kenya	2025-08-20	https://www.nation.co.ke/kenya/news/hours-after-formation-high-court-slams-breaks-on-ruto-anti-graft-taskforce--5161168	Hours after formation, High Court slams brakes on Ruto anti-graft taskforce
NE-11	News	AllAfrica (republishing SADC)	Southern Africa	2025-08-19	https://allafrica.com/stories/202508200010.html	Southern Africa: SADC Celebrates 20 Years of Anti-Corruption Cooperation

Source_ID	Media_Type	Outlet/Author	Country/Region	Date	URL_or_Reference	Headline/Title
NE-12	News	Africa Confidential (preview)	DRC	2025-08-18	https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/15611/tshisekedi-seeks-to-broaden-his-base	Tshisekedi seeks to broaden his base
NE-13	News	Vanguard (Nigeria)/ Luminous Jannamike	Nigeria	2025-08-17	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/08/tinubu-displays-courage-in-corruption-fight-ahacaci/	Tinubu displays courage in corruption fight – AHACCI
NE-14	News	ICAC Hong Kong (press release)	Kenya/Hong Kong	2025-08-15	https://www.icac.org.hk/en/p/press/index_id_2156.html	High-level anti-graft delegation of Kenya visits ICAC to foster international cooperation
NE-15	News	Kenyans.co.ke/ Rene Otinga	Kenya	2025-08-15	https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/115267-real-threat-justice-comes-dropped-anti-corruption-cases-not-bail-cj-koome-tells-ruto	Threat to Justice Comes from Dropped Anti-Corruption Cases, Not Bail - CJ Koome Tells Ruto
NE-16	News	Daily Post Nigeria/Hadiza Musa	Nigeria	2025-08-15	https://dailypost.ng/2025/08/15/fight-against-corruption-selective-northerners-react-to-tambuwal-arrest-by-efcc/	Fight against corruption ‘selective’ – Northerners react to Tambuwal’s arrest by EFCC
NE-17	News	SAPIENS/ Nicole van Zyl	South Africa	2025-08-14	https://www.sapiens.org/culture/corruption-south-africa-colonialism-apartheid-justice-system/	The Tangled Roots of Corruption in Today’s South Africa
NE-18	News	Daily Monitor (Uganda)/ Juliet Kigongo	Uganda	2025-08-14	https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/ex-policeman-admits-to-drawing-salary-for-5-years-after-resigning-5154330	Ex-policeman admits to drawing salary for 5 years after resigning
NE-19	News	Africanews	Senegal	2025-08-14	https://www.africanews.com/2025/08/14/senegal-president-exempts-himself-from-new-anti-corruption-law/	Senegal president exempts himself from new anti-corruption law
NE-20	News	The Economic Times (Nigeria)	Nigeria	2025-08-13	https://theeconomictimes.com.ng/2025/08/13/just-in-nigeria-moves-up-five-spots-to-rank-140th-out-of-180-on-global-corruption-index/	Just in: Nigeria moves up five spots to rank 140th out of 180 on global corruption index
NE-21	News	JURIST (rights groups statement)	Kenya	2025-08-20	https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/08/rights-groups-call-for-total-break-up-of-kenya-police-in-response-to-widespread-corruption/	Rights groups call for total break-up of Kenya police
NE-22	News	Corruption Watch (SA)	South Africa	2025-08-22	https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/border-authority-cracks-down-on-corrupt-officials/	Border Authority cracks down on corrupt officials
NE-23	News	SACBC (Church news)	South Africa	2025-08-18	https://sacbc.org.za/bishop-sipuka-urges-church-to-take-lead-against-corruption/	Bishop Sipuka urges Church to take lead against corruption
NE-24	News	Reuters	Kenya	2025-07-21	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenya-rights-activist-freed-bail-charged-with-unlawful-possession-ammunition-2025-07-21/	Kenya rights activist freed on bail after ammunition charge
NE-25	News	Deutsche Welle (DW)	Kenya	2025-07-22	https://www.dw.com/en/kenya-drops-terror-charges-against-activist-boniface-mwangi/a-73351406	Kenya drops terror charges against activist Boniface Mwangi

Source_ID	Media_Type	Outlet/Author	Country/Region	Date	URL_or_Reference	Headline/Title
NE-26	News	Sahara Reporters/ Omoyele Sowore remarks	Nigeria	2025-07-20	https://saharareporters.com/2025/07/20/buharis-so-called-integrity-was-one-greatest-propaganda-projects-sold-nigerians-sowore	Buhari's 'so-called integrity' was one of the greatest propaganda projects sold to Nigerians – Sowore
NE-27	News/ Analysis	MonDAQ (legal insight)	South Africa	2025-08-12	https://www.mondaq.com/southafrica/corporate-governance/1666006/south-africas-new-anti-bribery-law-setting-the-stage-for-corporate-accountability	South Africa's new anti-bribery law: setting the stage for corporate accountability
NE-28	News/ Analysis	Out-Law (Pinsent Masons)	South Africa	2025-08-12	https://www.pinsentmasons.com/out-law/news/south-africa-bribery-scandal-warning-compliance	South Africa bribery scandal caught on camera, in warning to businesses on compliance
NE-29	News/ Analysis	Yale E360	Liberia	2025-07-24	https://e360.yale.edu/features/liberia-forest-payment-scheme	Paying People: Liberia's novel plan to save its forests
NE-30	News	The African Mirror	Rwanda/ DRC/Great Lakes region	25-Aug-25	https://theafricanmirror.africa/news/rwanda-calls-for-urgent-action-on-drc-peace-as-regional-efforts-intensify/	Rwanda calls for urgent action on DRC peace as regional efforts intensify

Social Norms and Corruption in South Africa: The Struggle Beneath the Surface

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Abstract

Despite extensive legal reforms and institutional oversight mechanisms, corruption remains a persistent challenge in South Africa. Conventional anti-corruption strategies tend to emphasise legal frameworks and economic deterrence, often overlooking the role of social norms that shape everyday behaviour. This article examines how socialised and informal expectations surrounding loyalty, reciprocity and silence inform how corruption is interpreted and responded to in daily interactions. Drawing on the distinction between empirical and normative expectations, the study argues that corruption frequently persists because individuals perceive participation as socially expected or fear the social consequences of deviation. The study employs a vignette-based qualitative approach involving twelve purposively selected participants. Respondents were presented with hypothetical scenarios reflecting common governance encounters, including police roadblocks, procurement processes, nepotism in hiring, sextortion and small facilitation payments. This approach enabled participants to evaluate situations indirectly, allowing for a more candid exploration of social expectations surrounding corruption. Thematic analysis revealed several interrelated norms that shape behaviour. These include the stigma attached to reporting corruption, commonly framed through the label *impimpi*;¹ codes of silence rooted in loyalty to family or social networks; admiration for visible wealth that normalises corrupt enrichment; and the use of euphemistic language such as “cool drink” to soften the perception of bribery. The findings demonstrate that corruption is frequently sustained by social pressures rather than simply by individual opportunism. The article, therefore, argues that anti-corruption strategies focusing solely on institutional reform are unlikely to achieve lasting change. Addressing corruption effectively requires engaging with the social norms that structure everyday interactions. Policy responses should, therefore, complement legal reforms with interventions aimed at reshaping public narratives, strengthening ethical socialisation and promoting cultures of accountability within both institutions and communities.

Keywords: Social norms, corruption, anti-corruption, South Africa, whistleblowing, nepotism; sextortion.

1. Introduction

Few issues have shaped South Africa’s post-apartheid experience as profoundly as corruption, which continues to impose significant political, economic and social costs on the country (Thusi, Matyana and Jili 2023). Its effects are visible in weakened state capacity, declining public trust and the erosion of resources intended to address deep structural inequalities. In response, successive governments have adopted a range of reforms aligned with internationally endorsed “best practice” approaches to anti-corruption. These efforts have included the enactment of anti-corruption legislation, the strengthening of administrative oversight in high-risk areas such as public procurement and the establishment of anti-corruption institutions (Chivandire, Saruchera and Pillay 2024).

Despite these institutional developments and legal frameworks, corruption remains a persistent feature of public life. This persistence presents a puzzle for both scholars and practitioners. As Kubbe, Baez-Camargo and Scharbatke-Church (2024) observe, many countries experiencing high levels of corruption already possess legal and institutional frameworks that formally align with internationally recognised standards. The challenge, therefore, often lies in the difficulty of translating these frameworks into effective practice. This phenomenon is commonly described as the “implementation gap”, referring to the disconnect between the formal adoption of anti-corruption measures and their consistent enforcement (Stahl, Kassa and Baez-Camargo 2017). The persistence of such gaps has become a central concern

¹ An *impimpi* is a South African slang term for a police informer, spy or collaborator, particularly originating from the apartheid era where it designated a “sell-out” within communities. It is a Xhosa/Nguni word commonly used to denote a traitor or snitch who betrays others. Historically during the apartheid liberation struggle, *izimpimpi* (plural) were often perceived as traitors working with the state against township residents. The modern usage of the concept is that it is still used to describe a snitch, or someone viewed as a collaborator against community interests.



in contemporary anti-corruption debates, highlighting the limitations of reforms that focus primarily on institutional design without addressing the broader social and political contexts in which corruption occurs.

Mainstream anti-corruption strategies continue to focus primarily on legal and institutional reforms. This represents an important gap in literature. If corruption is partly sustained by social norms that define what is expected or tolerated in society, then reforms that target formal institutions alone are unlikely to produce lasting behavioural change. Recent South African evidence reflects this shift in thinking. Gordon and Pienaar (2025) argue that understanding the social norms and values that shape corruption is essential to supporting the implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS), emphasising that anti-corruption interventions should address behavioural expectations alongside legal and institutional reforms. Building on this emerging perspective, the current study examines the social norms that influence how individuals interpret corruption, loyalty and responsibility in everyday governance interactions. By shifting analytical attention from institutional structures to the unwritten rules governing everyday interactions, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of why corruption persists despite the existence of extensive legal frameworks in South Africa.

2. Social norms and corruption: A conceptual lens

Social norms refer to the shared expectations that shape what individuals perceive as typical and appropriate behaviour within a given social group or community. Unlike formal laws, social norms operate through informal understandings that guide behaviour by signalling what others do and what others expect one to do. These expectations create powerful incentives for conformity, because individuals anticipate approval for compliance and social sanctions for deviation (Varraich, Köbis and Lange 2025). In governance and corruption scholarship, norms are therefore understood as collectively sustained behavioural rules that influence decision-making even in the absence of formal enforcement.

Traditional approaches tend to treat corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, focusing primarily on legal frameworks and individual ethical failings. However, emerging research suggests that corrupt practices are often embedded within broader social environments shaped by expectations of reciprocity and loyalty (Köbis, Jackson and Carter 2020; Kubbe et al. 2024). From this perspective, corruption cannot be fully understood as an isolated act of defiance, but rather, it may reflect patterns of behaviour that are perceived as normal or even socially appropriate within relational contexts.

According to Varraich et al. (2025), when individuals believe that corrupt behaviour is widespread, norms may normalise participation by framing such behaviour as typical or unavoidable. Moreover, some norms may signal that refusing to engage in such practices risks social exclusion, reputational damage or the loss of valuable relationships (Bicchieri 2017; Köbis et al. 2020). Under these conditions, individuals may comply with corrupt practices despite privately disapproving of them, leading to conditional conformity. Recognising corruption as a norm-governed practice, therefore, shifts attention from formal institutional design to the informal expectations that structure everyday interactions. This perspective has gained increasing traction in South Africa, where Gordon and Pienaar (2025) argue that anti-corruption efforts should focus not only on changing formal rules, but also on reshaping the social norms and values that sustain corrupt behaviour.

2.1. *Types of social norms*

Literature distinguishes several useful types of norms that shape behaviour in distinct ways.

- Descriptive and injunctive norms

A widely used distinction in social norms research is between descriptive and injunctive norms. According to Agerberg (2022), descriptive norms refer to individuals' perceptions of what most people do in a particular situation. They capture beliefs about typical behaviour within a social group. For example, individuals may believe that everyone gives a small payment to speed up a service when interacting with public officials. In such cases, behaviour becomes normalised, because it is perceived as common practice. In contrast, injunctive norms refer to perceptions of what behaviours are socially approved or disapproved of within a group (Agerberg 2022; Bicchieri 2017). These norms communicate what individuals believe others think they ought to do. For instance, strong injunctive norms may discourage individuals from reporting wrongdoing if whistleblowing is interpreted as betrayal within a community.

- Reference group norms

Social norms do not operate uniformly across society, but are anchored within specific reference groups. A reference group consists of the individuals or communities whose opinions and behaviours are most salient when a person makes a decision (Heinicke, Köning-Kerstig and Schmidt 2022). These groups may include family networks, workplace colleagues or broader social circles (Habib, D'Costa and Al-Hadi 2023; Kubbe et al. 2024). According to Habib et al. (2023), individuals often belong to multiple overlapping reference groups, and the norms that guide behaviour may shift depending on which group is most relevant in a given situation. For example, a public official may recognise formal professional standards within the workplace while simultaneously feeling pressure to meet expectations within family or community networks.

2.2. *Empirical literature on social norms and corruption*

Studies consistently demonstrate that perceptions of what others do and what others approve of can significantly influence behaviour in corruption-prone environments (Köbis et al. 2020; Kubbe et al. 2024). These insights build on broader behavioural research showing that individuals often align their actions with perceived group expectations even when such behaviour conflicts with their private preferences. As a result, corruption is increasingly understood as a culturally and socially embedded practice rather than solely as a consequence of institutional failure.

Furthermore, empirical research suggests that corruption is embedded within patterns of reciprocity and social obligation. In several African contexts, for example, practices such as preferential hiring and informal payments are often interpreted through the lens of family and community responsibilities rather than purely as acts of misconduct (Kubbe et al. 2024; Varraich et al. 2025). Similar dynamics have also been documented in other regions where cultural expectations surrounding gift-giving or mutual assistance blur the boundaries between legitimate social exchange and bribery (Habib et al. 2023; Heinicke et al. 2022). These findings suggest that the meaning of corruption itself may be shaped by local normative environments. Behaviour that appears clearly unethical from a legal perspective may be perceived differently within social networks where loyalty and reciprocity carry moral significance. These observations are echoed by Gordon and Pienaar (2025), who found that many South Africans would prioritise protecting members of their own social networks over assisting authorities in exposing corruption. Such findings suggest that loyalty to family and social networks may continue to compete with formal expectations of accountability.

Despite the significant advances in existing literature, there are several limitations. Much of the empirical work examines perceptions of corruption through general survey questions or large-scale comparative datasets (Kubbe et al. 2024; Varraich et al. 2025). Recent South African work by Gordon and Pienaar (2025) has significantly advanced understanding by providing nationally representative evidence on social norms and corruption. However, the emphasis is on measuring attitudes and behavioural tendencies at population level rather than exploring the reasoning individuals employ when confronted with concrete corruption dilemmas. While such approaches provide valuable insights into patterns of attitudes and behaviour, they often capture abstract opinions rather than the reasoning individuals employ when confronted with specific situations.

As a result, there is relatively limited understanding of how people interpret corruption in the context of everyday governance encounters. There is a dearth of studies that examine how individuals negotiate tensions between formal rules and social expectations in concrete situations involving interactions with public officials or local networks. By employing vignette-based interviews, the current study contributes to this emerging strand of research by exploring how social norms shape responses to corruption within everyday situations in South Africa.

3. Methodology

The current study employs a vignette-based qualitative approach to examine how social norms shape perceptions of corruption in everyday contexts. As sensitive and potentially incriminating behaviour, corruption is particularly prone to social desirability bias, where respondents provide answers they perceive to be socially acceptable rather than truthful (Asif and Tankebe 2025).

According to Atzmüller and Steiner (2010), vignettes provide a useful alternative by presenting hypothetical scenarios that allow participants to evaluate behaviour without implicating themselves. Vignette methods have been widely used in corruption research as an unobtrusive way of accessing sensitive attitudes (Dickel and Graeff 2018). By shifting discussion toward third-person situations, respondents can express views about morally ambiguous practices without the need to disclose personal involvement.

3.1. Vignette design

The following scenarios were constructed to enhance authenticity and relevance. Realistic scenarios are essential in vignette research, because they encourage participants to engage with situations that closely resemble everyday experiences, thereby producing more meaningful and credible responses (Yenkey, Simpson and Bliese 2026). Accordingly, the vignettes reflected widely recognised interactions with public institutions and social networks, including:

- Encounters with the police
- Administrative services
- Procurement decisions
- Employment and kinship obligations
- South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) grant access
- Sextortion

3.2. Vignette scenarios

To explore how social norms shape perceptions of corruption in everyday contexts, participants were presented with a series of short hypothetical scenarios. These vignettes were designed to mirror situations that are widely recognised in public discourse and everyday governance interactions in South Africa. Each vignette was followed by a standard set of guiding questions that explored what participants believed the hypothetical individual should do, what most people would do in the same situation, what others would expect the individual to do, and the reasons underlying these judgements. The same core interview probes were used across all eight vignettes. The full list of vignette scenarios used in the current study is provided in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: Summary of vignette scenarios presented to participants

Vignette	Theme	Vignette text
1	Police roadblock	Rialdo is driving home late at night when he encounters a police roadblock. The officer checks his licence and notices a minor issue with his vehicle's registration. Instead of issuing a fine, the officer hints that a small "gift" of R200 could make the problem disappear, saying it is common for drivers to show appreciation for officers' hard work. Rialdo knows many in his community do this to avoid delays or trouble. What do you think Rialdo should do? What would most people in his situation do?
2	Queue jumping (DHA)	Sipho arrives at the South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to renew his passport and faces a long queue. An official offers to expedite his application for a R500 "fee" under the table, noting that many applicants do this to save time. Sipho sees others slipping money discreetly and knows complaining might cause endless delays. What should Sipho do? What would others expect?
3	Procurement tender	Nomusa, a municipal official, is evaluating tenders for a road construction project. A bidder who is an old school friend offers a "thank you gift" of R10 000 if awarded the contract, emphasising community ties and mutual favours. Many officials accept such gestures as normal reciprocity and part of getting things done. What do most colleagues expect Nomusa to do?
4	Nepotism	Kagiso manages a government department and has a vacancy. His nephew applies, though less qualified than many other applicants. Family elders pressure him to hire the nephew, citing cultural norms of kinship support and saying refusing would be seen as selfish and disloyal. What should Kagiso do? What do most managers expect in such cases?
5	Admiration of dubious success	Mandla, a local businessman with ties to municipal officials, suddenly buys a luxury car and builds a big house after securing government tenders through kickbacks and connections. Neighbours admire his flashy lifestyle, saying he is "smart" and "successful", and young people look up to him as a role model for getting rich quick. What do you think most people in the community would say if they knew the full story?
6	Sextortion	Bianca visits the South African Department of Transport to process her driver's licence. The male official delays her application and hints that meeting him privately for "favours" could speed it up, noting that many women do this quietly to get services. Bianca hears from friends that it is "normal" in such offices and refusing might lead to endless delays. What would most women in her situation expect or do?

Vignette	Theme	Vignette text
7	SASSA grant abuse	In a township, neighbours know that Tanja is fraudulently claiming SASSA child support grants for ineligible relatives. Despite knowing it is wrong, no one reports her to officials, as speaking up would be seen as betraying your own people and causing unnecessary trouble in the community. What should the neighbours do?
8	Community normalisation of petty corruption	In a neighbourhood, residents regularly pay small bribes or “tips” to officials for basic services like electricity and water connections. Most people see it as just the way things work and part of living in the area, rather than serious corruption. What do you think most residents would do?

Source: Authors' illustration

4. Participants and data analysis

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to capture perspectives from individuals likely to encounter or observe informal expectations surrounding everyday governance interactions. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research where the objective is to obtain analytically rich insights rather than statistically representative samples (Ahmad and Wilkins 2025). A maximum variation purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure diversity in participants' social backgrounds and lived experiences, thereby capturing a broad range of perspectives on how corruption is interpreted across different social contexts. Potential participants were identified through professional and community networks and selected against predefined inclusion criteria to ensure variation in demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Recruitment was guided by the objective of achieving information-rich cases rather than representativeness or prior knowledge of corruption. Twelve participants from four different race groups (Black African, Indian, Coloured and White), provinces, socio-economic and educational backgrounds and gender were included in the study. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research that prioritises analytical depth, information richness and detailed exploration of participants' reasoning rather than statistical representativeness (Ahmad and Wilkins 2025; Saunders et al. 2018). The diversity of the sample was intended to broaden the range of perspectives captured rather than to achieve representativeness across demographic categories. Interviews were conducted individually to allow participants to reflect on the scenarios without peer influence.

All participants were assured of anonymity and were informed that the discussion would centre on hypothetical situations presented through vignettes rather than personal experiences, thereby reducing the sensitivity associated with discussing corruption. Moreover, given the sensitive nature of corruption, the researchers adopted a reflexive approach throughout the study to minimise their influence on participants' responses and the interpretation of the data. The use of vignette scenarios and neutral questioning encouraged participants to discuss hypothetical situations rather than personal experiences, thereby, reducing social desirability bias. Interview responses were analysed using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves systematically identifying and interpreting recurring patterns within qualitative data. This approach enabled the study to examine how participants reasoned through the scenarios and how social expectations influenced their evaluations of corrupt practices.

5. Findings

Thematic analysis of the twelve vignette-based interviews revealed a range of social norms that shape how corruption is interpreted and responded to in everyday interactions. Responses reflected empirical expectations about what most people would do in similar situations as well as injunctive expectations concerning what others would expect from them. Participants often acknowledged that certain practices were technically wrong while simultaneously explaining why individuals might still comply to avoid conflict, maintain relationships or secure opportunities.

5.1. *Impimpi culture*

A prominent theme concerned the stigma attached to reporting corruption, particularly through the label “impimpi” which, as detailed above, carries significant stigma and undesirable negative social identity. Participants repeatedly described this term as carrying strong negative connotations of betrayal and disloyalty. In discussions on the police roadblock scenario, Participant 1 remarked that ‘Rialdo should just give the R200 and leave. Reporting the officer will make him an impimpi. People will say he thinks he is better than everyone else.’ Participant 3 expressed a similar sentiment, stating that ‘once you report someone like that you are known as a snitch. People will not trust you again’.

Participant 7 also suggested that reporting would bring unnecessary trouble, explaining that ‘if you expose the officer, you create problems for yourself. Next time you are stopped they will remember you’. Across these responses, the fear of being labelled *impimpi* functioned as a powerful informal sanction discouraging individuals from reporting corruption even when they personally disapprove of it. The responses reflected both empirical expectations, whereby participants believed that most people would remain silent, and injunctive expectations, whereby communities were perceived to expect loyalty over reporting. In this context, the local community functioned as the principal reference group shaping behaviour.

5.2. Codes of silence and loyalty to social networks

Closely related to the *impimpi* stigma was a broader expectation of silence when wrongdoing involves acquaintances or family members. Most of the participants (eight) suggested that exposing someone known personally would be regarded as morally questionable behaviour. In the vignette involving nepotism in a job appointment, Participant 5 explained that ‘Kagiso helping his nephew is something many families would understand. Family obligations come first’. Participant 6 offered a similar perspective, remarking that ‘reporting him would make you look disloyal because people expect you to support your relatives’. Participant 12 reflected on a similar dilemma, observing that ‘even if people know it is wrong, they might stay quiet because speaking out will damage the relationship’. These responses illustrate how expectations associated with loyalty and social solidarity override institutional norms. The reluctance to report wrongdoing stemmed less from support for corruption itself, but more from the perception of reporting violating relational obligations. Here, normative expectations were primarily generated within family and kinship reference groups, where loyalty was perceived to outweigh formal obligations to report wrongdoing.

5.3. Material aspirations and admiration of visible wealth

Material aspirations and the admiration associated with visible wealth emerged as another recurring theme. Participants described a social environment in which success is frequently measured through displays of material prosperity such as expensive cars, large houses or other visible signs of financial success. In the vignette involving a contractor offering a “thank you gift” after receiving a government tender, Participant 10 commented that ‘people respect those who have money. When someone lives well others admire them even if they suspect something is not right’. Participant 4 similarly remarked that ‘wealth brings status, and people rarely question how it was obtained’. Participant 11 added that ‘many people aspire for that kind of success, so they do not criticise it too much’.

These responses suggest that admiration for material success may contribute to a social environment in which corrupt enrichment is quietly tolerated and admired. Visible prosperity was often interpreted as a sign of competence or success rather than as evidence of unethical conduct. As a result, individuals who accumulate wealth through questionable means still receive social recognition and respect from sections of communities, notably those from historically disadvantaged Black communities. These responses were largely driven by empirical expectations, with participants perceiving admiration for visible wealth as common within their communities, thereby reinforcing material success as a socially desirable outcome irrespective of its origins.

5.4. Perceptions of widespread corruption in everyday life

Participants also described corruption as a routine feature of everyday interactions. Several responses suggested that practices such as small bribes are widely perceived as normal ways of navigating bureaucratic processes. Reflecting on the police roadblock scenario, Participant 4 observed that ‘most drivers would just pay and move on because that is what people normally do’. Participant 6 referred to administrative services, explaining that ‘people sometimes give money to speed things up because the queues are very long’. The responses illustrate how perceptions of widespread participation can reinforce descriptive norms that normalise corrupt behaviour. When individuals believe that others engage in such practices, resisting them appears impractical or socially unusual. At the same time, these practices may also be understood as pragmatic responses to the contradictions between formal rules and everyday state functioning, where citizens navigate inefficiencies in service delivery. The dominant norm in this theme was empirical as participants repeatedly justified corrupt behaviour by referring to what they believed most people routinely do in similar situations.

5.5. Normalisation of the “cool drink” culture

Another theme concerned the normalisation of euphemistic language that obscures the corrupt nature of petty bribery. Participants frequently referred to the term “cool drink”, a colloquial expression used to describe small payments to officials to expedite services or avoid

penalties. Participant 4 explained that ‘when an officer mentions a cool drink everyone understands what is being asked for’. Participant 7 similarly remarked that ‘it is not spoken about openly, but people know it means a small bribe’. These responses suggest that euphemistic language reduces the perceived seriousness of bribery by reframing it as a routine social exchange, rather than a corrupt act. Within these service-delivery contexts, participants described shared understandings that normalised petty financial facilitation, reinforcing both empirical expectations about what people commonly do and normative expectations regarding what is considered socially acceptable.

5.6. *Sextortion as a gendered form of corruption*

Sextortion also emerged as a distinct form of corruption characterised by the abuse of institutional authority for sexual coercion. Participant 6 observed that ‘sometimes officials ask for sexual favours in exchange for assistance and people know it happens even though it is rarely discussed’. Participant 8 similarly reflected that ‘women may feel pressured in those situations because they need the service’.

Participants described sextortion as rooted in unequal power relations, where access to essential public services creates conditions for exploitation. The reluctance to discuss such experiences openly suggests that social norms surrounding silence and stigma may further contribute to the hidden nature of this form of corruption. Within these institutional settings, organisational reference groups appeared to reinforce both empirical and normative expectations that discouraged victims from challenging such abuses.

6. Discussion

The findings of the current study reinforce the growing body of literature that views corruption not merely as a legal or institutional failure, but as behaviour embedded within social expectations. Participants frequently evaluated the vignette scenarios through the lens of what others were perceived to do and what others were expected to approve of. This pattern closely reflects the conceptualisation of social norms advanced by Bicchieri (2006, 2017), where behaviour is shaped by empirical expectations about the actions of others and normative expectations regarding what others consider appropriate. This confirms the argument that individuals conform to corrupt practices even when they privately disapprove of them, particularly when deviation carries social costs (Köbis et al. 2020; Varraich et al. 2025). This is also consistent with the findings by Gordon and Pienaar (2025), who argue that corruption in South Africa is sustained not only by institutional weaknesses, but also by prevailing social norms and values that shape behavioural expectations. However, the findings also suggest that empirical and normative expectations rarely operated independently. Participants frequently justified corrupt behaviour by simultaneously referring to what “most people do” and what they believed others expected of them. Rather than functioning as separate influences, these expectations appeared to reinforce one another, transforming corruption from behaviour that is merely widespread into behaviour that is perceived as socially appropriate under particular circumstances.

One of the most striking findings concerned the strong stigma attached to reporting corruption through the label “impimpi”. Participants consistently described reporting as behaviour that would attract social disapproval and lead to social isolation. This finding supports the broader literature which emphasises that norms can be sustained through anticipated social sanctions rather than formal enforcement (Varraich et al. 2025). Within the framework proposed by Bicchieri (2017), such reactions represent injunctive norms that signal what individuals are expected to do within their social environment. Similarly, Gordon and Pienaar (2025) report that many South Africans remain reluctant to report corruption despite condemning it, suggesting that anticipated social and personal consequences continue to discourage whistleblowing. This suggests that strengthening whistleblowing mechanisms alone is unlikely to be sufficient, unless interventions also address the informal sanctions associated with reporting corruption.

Furthermore, the expectation of silence within social networks further illustrates how reference group norms shape responses to corruption and other social and political vices. This aligns with the literature suggesting that corruption often emerges within relational contexts characterised by expectations of reciprocity and loyalty (Kubbe et al. 2024; Varraich et al. 2025). As noted by Habib et al. (2023), individuals belong to multiple reference groups, each of which may generate different normative expectations. The findings suggest that these reference groups exert different forms of normative pressure. Family and kinship networks encourage loyalty and reciprocal obligations, while workplace relationships normalise favour exchange and silence regarding misconduct. Community reference groups, by contrast, reinforce expectations associated with the impimpi stigma and discourage reporting. This implies that anti-corruption interventions may be more effective when they are tailored to the specific reference groups within which corrupt practices are embedded.

Moreover, the theme of admiration for visible wealth provides additional insight into how social norms may indirectly encourage corruption. This resonates with the broader literature suggesting that corruption can become normalised in environments where wealth

accumulation is highly valued and publicly visible (Köbis et al. 2020; Kubbe et al. 2024). The significance of this finding lies in the way visible prosperity appears to weaken the informal social sanctions that would ordinarily discourage corrupt enrichment. Where communities celebrate material success irrespective of its origins, corruption risks becoming socially legitimised.

7. Policy and practice recommendations

Anti-corruption strategies in South Africa must move beyond a narrow and punitive focus on legal enforcement and institutional reform. Addressing corruption requires interventions engaging directly with the social environments in which these behaviours occur.

7.1. Reframing public education

Anti-corruption education should be incorporated into school curricula from primary through secondary and tertiary levels to cultivate a culture of integrity among younger generations. Educational initiatives should engage learners with everyday ethical dilemmas like those illustrated in the scenarios examined in this study. Such approaches align with social norms interventions that seek to reshape expectations by influencing how individuals perceive acceptable behaviour within their reference groups (Bicchieri 2017; Tankard and Paluck 2016).

Efforts to strengthen ethical awareness should also extend beyond the formal education system. Families and community institutions often function as primary sites of moral guidance, shaping how individuals interpret concepts such as loyalty and fairness. Community dialogues and civic education initiatives that engage parents, religious leaders and local organisations may therefore provide complementary spaces for fostering discussions about integrity and accountability in everyday life.

7.2. Strengthening trust in anti-corruption institutions

The persistence of corruption is often reinforced by perceptions that wrongdoing carries few consequences. Consistent enforcement of anti-corruption laws and visible accountability for misconduct can signal that ethical standards apply across all levels of authority. Public communication regarding investigations and prosecutions should be transparent and accessible; demonstrating that corruption leads to tangible consequences, particularly in cases involving politically connected individuals may help counter perceptions of impunity.

7.3. Professionalising the public service

The findings relating to nepotism and favour exchange, highlight the importance of strengthening merit-based governance structures. The full implementation of the Framework for the Professionalisation of the Public Sector, alongside initiatives such as Batho Pele (People First), which emphasises service delivery standards and responsiveness to service users, represents an important step toward establishing a politically neutral and competency-based administrative system. Transparent recruitment processes and clear performance standards can reduce opportunities for patronage and reinforce ethical norms within public institutions. Strengthening formal institutional norms may also help shift reference group expectations within organisations, reinforcing professional conduct as the expected standard (Habib et al. 2023).

7.4. Addressing gendered forms of corruption

The normalisation of sextortion highlighted in the findings underscores the need for targeted interventions that address gendered abuses of power. Institutional reforms should incorporate confidential reporting systems and investigative procedures that are sensitive to the vulnerabilities faced by victims of sexual exploitation. Clear policies defining sextortion as a form of corruption must be accompanied by mechanisms protecting complainants from retaliation. Training programmes within public institutions should also challenge patriarchal norms that contribute to the abuse of authority. Addressing such practices requires shifting both descriptive and injunctive norms that currently normalise or silence these experiences (Bicchieri 2017).

7.5. Encouraging active citizenship and social accountability and behaviour change

Strengthening civic participation can contribute to shifting social expectations surrounding corruption. When citizens actively engage in monitoring service delivery, participating in local governance processes and supporting civil society initiatives, they help reinforce norms of transparency and accountability. Encouraging citizens to participate in community forums and social accountability mechanisms can foster an enhanced sense of collective responsibility for safeguarding public resources. Norm-based approaches emphasise the role

of collective action in correcting misperceptions about the prevalence and acceptability of corruption, thereby encouraging behavioural change (Agerberg 2022; Tankard and Paluck 2016).

8. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how social norms shape everyday understandings of corruption in South Africa. By using vignette-based interviews, the study moved beyond abstract attitudes toward corruption and explored how individuals reason about concrete situations involving public officials and social networks. The findings demonstrate that corruption is frequently interpreted through the lens of prevailing social expectations, rather than solely through legal or institutional frameworks. Norms associated with loyalty and admiration for visible wealth often shape how individuals evaluate behaviour and respond to ethical dilemmas. In many instances, participants recognised that certain practices violated formal rules, yet still regarded them as understandable responses to the social pressures present within their communities and professional environments. These findings reinforce the argument that corruption cannot be fully addressed through institutional reforms alone. Addressing corruption requires approaches that engage directly with these social expectations by incentivising the fight against corruption, rewarding integrity and promoting cultures of integrity within both public institutions and society more broadly.

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The Role of Storytelling and the Methodological Challenges Encountered as a Mitigation Strategy in Combatting Anti-Corruption in South Africa: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of storytelling in anti-corruption efforts in South Africa, highlighting both its potential and its limitations. Storytelling is increasingly recognised as a people-centred approach that makes complex issues such as corruption more visible and relatable by drawing on lived experiences. Grounded in social constructivism and narrative theory, it shapes how individuals understand and respond to corruption within their social contexts. The study adopts a qualitative narrative literature review, analysing interdisciplinary scholarship to explore how storytelling influences perceptions, social norms and behavioural responses. The findings show that storytelling helps humanise corruption, fosters emotional engagement and can contribute to shifts in attitudes by challenging the normalisation of corrupt practices. However, important limitations are identified, including the subjectivity of narratives, difficulties in measuring impact and the need for contextual adaptation in a diverse society such as South Africa. The study concludes that storytelling is a valuable, however, insufficient tool on its own. Its effectiveness depends on its integration with broader anti-corruption strategies, including institutional reforms and context-sensitive interventions. When carefully designed and ethically applied, storytelling can complement conventional approaches by addressing the social and behavioural dimensions of corruption and supporting more inclusive and sustainable anti-corruption efforts.

Keywords: Anti-corruption, storytelling, narrative theory, social constructivism, public perception, qualitative methods

1. Introduction

Corruption remains a major challenge to governance and development in South Africa, affecting public trust, service delivery and institutional performance. Since the transition to democracy, the country has faced persistent corruption across sectors, including public administration, procurement systems and political institutions. Studies show that corruption in South Africa is deeply rooted in structural and historical factors, including inequality, weak accountability mechanisms and political interference (Mlambo, Mubecua and Mlambo 2023; Vyas-Doorgapersad 2024). Despite the introduction of various anti-corruption frameworks, progress has been limited, with many interventions failing to deliver meaningful, sustained change (Labik Amanquandor 2024).

Traditional anti-corruption approaches in South Africa have largely focussed on legal, institutional and policy-based solutions. While these are important, they often overlook the social and behavioural dimensions of corruption. Corruption is not only about rules being broken, but also about how individuals and communities understand, justify or resist such practices. This highlights the importance of exploring approaches that address public perceptions and social norms. Emerging research on governance and social change suggests that corruption is sustained not only by weak institutions, but also by shared beliefs and everyday practices that normalise it (Mkhize and Nel-Sanders 2026).

Within this context, storytelling has begun to attract attention as a potential tool for influencing social norms and promoting behavioural change. Storytelling allows individuals to share lived experiences of corruption in ways that are relatable and emotionally engaging. It can make abstract governance issues more visible and meaningful, thereby encouraging reflection and dialogue within communities. While storytelling has been widely used in fields such as public health and education to support awareness and behaviour change (McCall et al. 2021; West et al. 2022), its application within anti-corruption research, particularly in South Africa, remains underdeveloped.

At the same time, the use of storytelling raises important methodological questions. Narrative-based approaches are often subjective and context-dependent, making it difficult to generalise findings or measure impact. In addition, much of the existing literature on corruption narratives is drawn from contexts outside Africa, such as Gupta's (2005) study of the Indian state. While such work provides useful insights, it cannot be applied directly to South Africa without accounting for contextual differences in its political systems, history and social dynamics.



The current study addresses these gaps by conducting a qualitative narrative literature review that brings together insights from anti-corruption studies, narrative theory and qualitative research. It critically examines both the potential and the limitations of storytelling as a mitigation strategy against corruption in South Africa. In doing so, the study contributes to a more balanced understanding of how storytelling can be used alongside existing governance approaches to promote accountability, shift social norms and support long-term behavioural change.

2. Conceptualising corruption and anti-corruption in South Africa

Corruption is widely conceptualised as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, yet this definition captures only part of its complexity, particularly within the South African context. Corruption manifests across multiple levels of society, ranging from high-level political misconduct to everyday administrative interactions between citizens and public officials. In South Africa, it takes diverse forms, including bribery, fraud, patronage, nepotism and the misappropriation of public resources. These practices not only undermine institutional effectiveness, they also erode the legitimacy of governance systems and democratic accountability (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2025).

Importantly, corruption in South Africa cannot be understood solely as an institutional or legal failure. It is deeply embedded within broader socio-political and historical dynamics. The enduring legacy of apartheid has produced structural inequalities, economic exclusion and uneven access to resources, all of which create conditions conducive to corrupt practices (Hyslop 2005). In such contexts, corruption may become normalised or rationalised as a survival strategy, particularly among marginalised populations facing limited socio-economic opportunities. This highlights that corruption is not only a matter of individual wrongdoing, but also shaped by social norms, perceptions and systemic inequalities (Katzarova 2015).

The drivers of corruption in South Africa are similarly multifaceted. Weak accountability mechanisms, insufficient transparency, political interference in administrative processes and inconsistent enforcement of legal frameworks all contribute to an environment that enables corruption (Cloete and Auriacombe 2007). Furthermore, governance gaps, particularly at local government levels, exacerbate vulnerabilities within public institutions. Socio-economic pressures, including high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, further complicate the issue by incentivising corrupt behaviour to access resources or secure livelihoods.

The consequences of corruption are extensive and deeply damaging. Economically, corruption distorts resource allocation, reduces efficiency, and discourages both domestic and foreign investment. Socially, it undermines service delivery in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, housing and infrastructure, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations. Politically, corruption erodes public trust in government institutions, weakens democratic participation and contributes to a broader crisis of legitimacy. In the South African context, these effects are particularly acute, as corruption reinforces existing inequalities and limits the state's capacity to fulfil its developmental mandate.

In response, anti-corruption efforts in South Africa have traditionally focussed on legal and institutional mechanisms, including the establishment of oversight bodies, regulatory frameworks, and investigative commissions. While these approaches remain essential, they have proven insufficient on their own. Increasingly, scholars argue that combating corruption requires a more holistic approach that incorporates social, cultural and communicative dimensions. Anti-corruption strategies must, therefore, engage with how corruption is understood, experienced and narrated within society.

This shift in perspective creates space for alternative approaches, such as storytelling, as a complementary anti-corruption strategy. Storytelling can play a critical role in shaping public perceptions, raising awareness and fostering ethical norms by making abstract issues of corruption more relatable and emotionally resonant. However, the use of storytelling as a methodological and practical tool also introduces challenges, including issues of subjectivity, representation and the difficulty of measuring impact. These challenges highlight the need for careful methodological consideration when integrating narrative-based approaches into anti-corruption frameworks.

3. Theoretical framework: Storytelling, power and anti-corruption in South Africa

Storytelling is increasingly recognised as a powerful interpretive and methodological tool within governance and anti-corruption scholarship. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, narratives are not merely descriptive, but constitutive of social reality, shaping how corruption is understood, legitimised or contested (Foucault 1980). In the South African context, this dynamic is especially evident in the framing of "state capture", a term popularised in public discourse and formalised in the Zondo Commission Report (Zondo Commission 2022).

From a narrative policy perspective, Roe (1994) argues that complex policy problems, such as systemic corruption, are mediated through competing stories that simplify uncertainty. These narratives influence policy responses by privileging certain actors and explanations over others. In South Africa, dominant narratives of corruption often oscillate between individual blame (for example, corrupt politicians) and systemic critique (for example, institutional failure), each with different implications for reform (Chipkin and Swilling 2018).

Complementing this, Polkinghorne (1988) conceptualises storytelling as a method of meaning-making, in which lived experiences are organised into coherent accounts. This is particularly relevant in anti-corruption efforts that rely on whistleblower testimonies and public inquiries. Testimonies presented during the Zondo Commission, for example, transformed abstract corruption into personal, emotional and credible narratives that mobilised public awareness (Zondo Commission 2022). However, storytelling is not neutral. Tobin and Snyman (2008) highlight how dominant narratives can marginalise alternative voices. In South Africa, this raises important methodological concerns: whose stories are amplified, and whose are silenced? Grassroots accounts of corruption, particularly from marginalised communities, often remain underrepresented in formal anti-corruption discourse (Dhlamini 2024).

The framework also integrates insights from governance and corruption scholarship. Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016) emphasise that corruption persists where institutional incentives and weak accountability structures enable it. In South Africa, these conditions were evident in procurement abuses involving entities such as Eskom and Transnet during the state capture era (Chipkin and Swilling 2018; Zondo Commission 2022).

Importantly, storytelling emerges as a mitigation strategy by fostering transparency and civic engagement. Corruption Watch uses citizen-reported narratives to document everyday corruption, demonstrating how storytelling can democratise accountability processes (Corruption Watch 2023). Similarly, media narratives around the VBS Mutual Bank Scandal illustrate how investigative storytelling can expose complex financial misconduct and mobilise public outrage (Freund 2019; Pauw 2017). Nevertheless, methodological challenges remain. Narratives are inherently subjective, potentially biased and difficult to verify. As Riessman (2008) notes, narrative analysis requires careful interpretation to avoid overgeneralisation. In corruption research, this challenge is compounded by political sensitivities and the risks whistleblowers face.

In all, this theoretical framework positions storytelling as both an analytical lens and a practical tool in anti-corruption efforts. It highlights the dual role of narratives in exposing corruption while also cautioning against their limitations. By situating storytelling within broader theories of power, governance and policy narratives, the framework provides a nuanced foundation for examining anti-corruption strategies in South Africa.

4. Methodology

The current study adopts a qualitative narrative literature review to examine the role of storytelling and the methodological challenges associated with its use in anti-corruption research, with particular reference to South Africa. Rather than employing a systematic literature review, which requires exhaustive search procedures, formal screening protocols and statistical synthesis, this study uses a narrative approach that allows for interpretive, theory-driven engagement with diverse bodies of literature. Narrative reviews are particularly suited to exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena such as storytelling, where meaning is shaped by social, cultural and political dynamics rather than by easily quantifiable variables (Baumeister and Leary 1997; Green, Johnson and Adams 2006).

The choice of this approach is grounded in the nature of the research problem. Storytelling operates as both a methodological tool and a social practice through which individuals make sense of their lived experiences, including experiences of corruption. As such, it cannot be adequately captured through rigid inclusion protocols alone. Instead, a narrative review enables the integration of insights from multiple disciplines, including governance studies, anthropology, political science and qualitative research methodology (Creswell and Poth 2016). Foundational works on corruption, such as Gupta's (2005) analysis of the everyday state and Rose-Ackerman and Palifka's (2016) institutional perspective, are combined with key contributions from narrative theory, including Polkinghorne (1988) and Roe (1994), to provide a robust conceptual foundation. These are further complemented by South African scholarship on state capture and governance, including Chipkin and Swilling (2018), Heckel and Ensign (2026), and the findings of the Zondo Commission (Pienaar and Bohler-Muller 2023; Zondo Commission 2022).

The literature used in the current study was identified through targeted searches of major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science. Search terms included combinations of “storytelling”, “narratives”, “corruption”, “anti-corruption”, “governance” and “South Africa” as well as related concepts such as “state capture”, “public accountability” and “qualitative methods”. In addition to keyword searches, backward and forward citation tracking was employed to identify influential and widely cited works, thereby ensuring that the review captures both foundational and contemporary contributions to the field (Green et al. 2006).

The selection of sources was guided by clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were applied flexibly and interpretively, consistent with narrative review methodology. Studies were included if they engaged with storytelling or narrative approaches related to governance, corruption or social change; demonstrated clear theoretical or methodological grounding and were relevant to the Global South or the South African context. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and credible institutional reports were prioritised. Studies were excluded where they relied solely on quantitative corruption indices without interpretive analysis, lacked sufficient methodological transparency or were not accessible in full text.

Importantly, the current study does not attempt to provide an exhaustive catalogue of all available literature on storytelling and corruption. Instead, it aims to synthesise key themes, identify conceptual linkages and highlight methodological challenges in the existing scholarship. This approach allows for a more critical and context-sensitive understanding of how storytelling functions within anti-corruption efforts, particularly in a complex and highly politicised environment such as South Africa.

5. Storytelling as a tool in anti-corruption efforts

Storytelling is increasingly recognised as a powerful tool for communication, education and social change. Within the framework of social constructivism, storytelling plays a central role in shaping how corruption is understood, interpreted and normalised within society. Corruption is not only a legal or institutional issue, but also a socially constructed phenomenon, shaped by shared meanings, everyday experiences and public discourse. Storytelling contributes to this process by framing corruption in ways that influence how individuals and communities perceive its causes, consequences and acceptability (Katzarova 2015; Riessman 2008).

From a narrative theory perspective, storytelling functions as a mechanism through which individuals organise and communicate their experiences. Narratives help simplify complex and abstract issues, such as corruption, by grounding them in personal and community realities. This aligns with Polkinghorne’s (1988) argument that people make sense of the world through stories, as well as Roe’s (1994) view that narratives are essential for interpreting complex policy problems. In the context of anti-corruption, storytelling transforms corruption from an abstract governance issue into a lived and emotionally resonant experience, thereby making it more accessible and meaningful to broader audiences.

One of the key strengths of storytelling lies in its ability to generate emotional engagement, which is critical for reshaping social norms. Within a constructivist framework, norms are sustained through repeated social interactions and shared beliefs. Where corruption has become normalised, as in many parts of South Africa due to persistent exposure to governance failures, storytelling can disrupt these patterns by introducing alternative narratives that challenge the status quo. McCall et al. (2021) emphasise that storytelling can function not only as a method of inquiry, but also as an intervention that influences behaviour. Similarly, West et al. (2022) highlight that personal narratives deepen understanding and can shift attitudes towards social issues, including corruption.

In South Africa, the importance of storytelling in shaping public understanding of corruption is evident in both formal and informal contexts. Testimonies presented during the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (Zondo Commission) transformed public discourse by providing detailed, personal accounts of how corruption operates within state institutions (Zondo Commission 2022). These narratives did not merely present evidence; they actively constructed a shared understanding of corruption as systemic and deeply embedded within governance structures. This illustrates the intersection of narrative theory and social constructivism: stories both reflect and shape social reality (Pienaar and Bohler-Muller 2023).

Beyond formal inquiries, storytelling has also been used in community-based and sectoral interventions (DeMarco, Cooley and Kim 2025). Uwah and Cheteni (2024) demonstrate how theatrical storytelling has been used effectively in public health campaigns to influence behaviour and raise awareness. From a theoretical perspective, such approaches work because they embed messages within culturally relevant narratives, thereby enhancing their resonance and impact. Applied to anti-corruption, similar strategies can be used to illustrate how corruption affects access to essential services such as healthcare, education and infrastructure, linking individual experiences to broader governance challenges.

Storytelling also aligns with participatory and inclusive approaches to governance by amplifying the voices of those often excluded from formal decision-making processes. Narrative theory emphasises the importance of voice and lived experience, while social constructivism highlights the role of diverse perspectives in shaping social meaning. Walker (2025) argues that storytelling can empower individuals, particularly young people, to engage in discussions on social justice and advocate for change. In the anti-corruption context, this means that storytelling can democratise knowledge production by allowing citizens to articulate their experiences of corruption and contest dominant narratives.

Furthermore, storytelling contributes to the transformation of social norms by exposing the everyday realities of corruption and challenging its normalisation. Gupta (2005) shows that corruption is often embedded in routine interactions between citizens and the state, making it appear ordinary or unavoidable. Narrative interventions can disrupt this perception by reframing corruption as unjust and unacceptable, thereby contributing to normative change. This aligns with broader anti-corruption scholarship, which emphasises that sustainable reform requires not only institutional change, but also shifts in social attitudes and expectations (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016).

The rise of digital platforms has further expanded the reach and influence of storytelling. Digital storytelling enables narratives to be widely disseminated through multimedia formats, increasing accessibility and engagement. From a constructivist perspective, this amplifies the circulation of meanings and norms across different social groups. Ahada et al. (2024) and West et al. (2022) note that digital platforms enable the rapid sharing of stories, making them powerful tools for advocacy and public engagement in anti-corruption efforts.

However, the effectiveness of storytelling depends on its contextual relevance and ethical application. Narratives must be sensitive to local cultural norms, languages and power dynamics. From a theoretical standpoint, this reflects the constructivist emphasis on context and the narrative emphasis on interpretation. Stories can be interpreted in multiple ways, and their impact is shaped by the audience's social and cultural background. This highlights the need for carefully designed storytelling approaches that are inclusive, context-specific and aligned with broader anti-corruption strategies.

In sum, storytelling is not merely a communication tool, it is a socially embedded practice that shapes how corruption is understood and contested. By linking emotional engagement with norm transformation and meaning-making, storytelling provides a powerful mechanism for advancing anti-corruption efforts. When grounded in social constructivism and narrative theory, it becomes clear that storytelling can influence not only awareness, but also the deeper social norms and collective understandings that sustain or challenge corruption.

6. Methodological challenges of storytelling

While storytelling offers valuable insights and engagement in anti-corruption research, it also presents several methodological challenges that must be carefully considered. These challenges relate to issues of subjectivity, interpretation, bias, validity and the difficulty of measuring impact. One of the main challenges of storytelling is its subjective nature. Stories are based on personal experiences, emotions and perspectives, which means they are often influenced by individual beliefs and contexts. This makes it difficult to treat storytelling as an objective source of data. Different individuals may recount the same events in very different ways, depending on how they interpret their experiences. As a result, storytelling may not always produce consistent or generalisable findings (Arekion 2023). Roulston and Shelton (2015) argue that subjectivity and bias are inherent in qualitative research and should be recognised rather than ignored.

Another key issue is variability in interpretation. Stories do not have a single fixed meaning; instead, they can be understood differently by different audiences. Factors such as culture, education and personal background influence how people interpret narratives. Sheard (2022) highlights that storytelling involves both the act of telling and the act of interpreting, which can lead to multiple meanings. This creates a challenge for researchers who aim to draw clear conclusions from narrative data. Cultural and contextual differences also affect the effectiveness of storytelling. A story that resonates strongly in one community may not have the same impact in another. This is particularly important in a diverse society like South Africa, where cultural backgrounds and social experiences vary widely. Wheeler (2018) shows how storytelling shapes political identities differently across contexts, suggesting that narratives must be carefully adapted to local realities. Without this sensitivity, storytelling may fail to achieve its intended purpose.

Another methodological concern relates to bias and representation. Researchers play an active role in selecting, interpreting and presenting stories, which can introduce bias into the research process. Decisions about which stories to include and how to analyse them can influence the overall findings. Gupta (2005) points out that narratives of corruption are shaped by both everyday experiences and broader social structures, underscoring the need for researchers to avoid oversimplification and misrepresentation of these complexities.

Issues of validity and reliability also arise when using storytelling as a research method. Traditional research often relies on measurable, replicable data, however, storytelling does not easily fit within these standards. It can be difficult to verify the accuracy of personal narratives or to ensure consistency across different accounts. This creates challenges in assessing the credibility of the findings and in comparing results across studies.

In addition, there is the challenge of measuring impact, particularly behavioural change. While storytelling can raise awareness and influence attitudes, it is not always clear whether these changes lead to concrete actions. McCall et al. (2021) suggest that although storytelling can be used as an intervention, evaluating its outcomes remains complex. Changes in perception may be gradual and difficult to track, especially when they occur over a long period.

Ethical concerns also form part of the methodological challenges. Storytelling often involves sharing personal or sensitive experiences, especially in the context of corruption. This raises issues related to consent, confidentiality and potential risks to participants. Researchers must ensure that stories are collected and presented in ways that respect participants' dignity and safety. Despite these challenges, storytelling remains a useful qualitative approach when applied carefully. Recognising its limitations enables researchers to design better studies, combine storytelling with other methods and develop more reliable ways to interpret narrative data.

7. Storytelling, behavioural change, and the limits of narrative influence

While storytelling plays a significant role in shaping awareness and attitudes towards corruption, its ability to produce sustained behavioural change is more complex and conditional. Moving beyond its communicative function, this section critically examines how storytelling interacts with social norms, institutional constraints and power relations to influence behaviour.

From a social constructivist perspective, behavioural change is not simply the result of increased awareness but is embedded within socially constructed norms and expectations. Although storytelling can reshape how corruption is understood, individuals operate within environments where corrupt practices may be normalised or even necessary for survival. As Gupta (2005) demonstrates, corruption is often embedded in everyday administrative practices, making it difficult for individuals to act against it even when they recognise its harmful effects. This highlights a key limitation: changing narratives does not automatically translate into changing behaviour.

Narrative theory further helps explain this gap. While stories can influence how individuals interpret corruption, they do not necessarily alter the structural conditions within which decisions are made. Roe (1994) argues that narratives simplify complex realities, however, this simplification can obscure the institutional and political constraints that shape behaviour. In the South African context, this is evident in the persistence of corruption despite widespread public awareness generated by high-profile processes such as the Zondo Commission. While the Commission played a crucial role in reshaping public discourse, its impact on everyday practices has been uneven, particularly in contexts where accountability mechanisms remain weak.

The gap between awareness and action can also be understood through the lens of normative and institutional constraints. Individuals may be aware of corruption and even disapprove of it, yet still participate due to fear of retaliation, lack of alternatives or social pressure. This is particularly relevant in local governance contexts, where access to services may depend on informal payments or personal connections. In such cases, storytelling may raise awareness but does not sufficiently alter the incentive structures that sustain corrupt behaviour (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016).

Moreover, storytelling can have ambivalent effects. While it can challenge dominant narratives and promote accountability, it can also reinforce cynicism if it repeatedly highlights corruption without demonstrating pathways for change. Continuous exposure to stories of corruption, especially in the media and public discourse, may normalise the perception that corruption is inevitable, thereby reducing the likelihood of collective action. This underscores the importance of not only exposing corruption, but also constructing counter-narratives that emphasise resistance, accountability and successful reform.

At the same time, storytelling can contribute to behavioural change when it is embedded within broader institutional and social interventions. Walker (2025) shows that participatory storytelling approaches can empower individuals, particularly young people, to engage with social justice issues and act. Similarly, West et al. (2022) argue that storytelling is most effective when combined with opportunities for dialogue, collective reflection and civic engagement. In such contexts, storytelling functions not as a standalone tool, but as part of a wider ecosystem that supports behavioural change.

In the South African context, this suggests that storytelling initiatives must be linked to institutional accountability mechanisms, community engagement processes and accessible reporting channels. Without these enabling conditions, storytelling risks remaining at the level of awareness-raising rather than driving meaningful change.

8. Discussion: Storytelling, social norms and the limits of anti-corruption interventions

The current study examined the role of storytelling in anti-corruption efforts and the methodological challenges associated with its use, with particular reference to South Africa. Rather than treating storytelling as simply a communication tool, the findings suggest that it operates more fundamentally as a mechanism for constructing, reinforcing and contesting social norms around corruption. This shifts the analytical focus from what storytelling *does* (raising awareness) to how it *works within broader social and institutional systems*.

Drawing on social constructivism, the findings demonstrate that corruption is not only a legal or institutional failure, but also a socially embedded practice shaped by shared meanings and everyday experiences (Katzarova 2015; Riessman 2008). Storytelling contributes to this process by framing corruption in ways that make it intelligible and relatable. In the South African context, public narratives, particularly those emerging from high-profile inquiries such as the Zondo Commission (2022), have played a significant role in constructing corruption as systemic, rather than incidental. These narratives have helped shift public discourse; however, they have also revealed the depth of institutional and social entrenchment that makes corruption resistant to change.

At the same time, narrative theory highlights that stories do not simply reflect reality; they actively shape how individuals interpret and respond to it (Polkinghorne 1988; Roe 1994). This helps explain why storytelling is effective in influencing perceptions, but less consistent in producing behavioural change. While narratives can generate emotional engagement and moral reflection, they do not automatically alter the structural conditions—such as weak accountability systems or unequal access to resources—that sustain corrupt practices. As a result, storytelling operates most effectively at the level of meaning-making, however, less predictably at the level of behavioural transformation.

A key contribution of this study is its identification of the gap between awareness and action as a central limitation of storytelling-based anti-corruption strategies. Although storytelling can reshape attitudes and increase public understanding, individuals often remain constrained by institutional and social realities. In many South African contexts, engaging in or tolerating corruption may be linked to survival strategies, social obligations or fear of retaliation. This aligns with institutional perspectives on corruption, which emphasise that behaviour is shaped not only by values, but also by incentives and constraints (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016; Vyas-Doorgapersad 2024). Consequently, storytelling alone cannot overcome these structural barriers.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that storytelling can have ambivalent effects. While it can challenge dominant narratives and promote accountability, it may also reinforce perceptions of inevitability if it repeatedly highlights corruption without presenting viable alternatives. Continuous exposure to corruption narratives, particularly through the media and public discourse, can foster cynicism and disengagement, thereby weakening the potential for collective action. This underscores the importance of developing counter-narratives that not only expose corruption, but also highlight examples of resistance, accountability and institutional reform.

The South African context provides a particularly important lens for understanding these dynamics. The prominence of corruption in public discourse, combined with persistent governance challenges, creates an environment in which storytelling is both highly visible and highly contested. While national-level narratives have been effective in raising awareness, their translation into local-level behavioural change remains uneven. This suggests that storytelling interventions must be context-sensitive, locally grounded and linked to tangible opportunities for action to be effective.

Methodologically, the study also highlights important challenges associated with using storytelling in research. Narratives are inherently subjective, shaped by the perspectives of both participants and researchers (Roulston and Shelton 2015). Their interpretation is context-dependent and may vary across audiences (Sheard 2022). While this does not undermine their value, it requires careful reflexivity and methodological transparency. Storytelling should therefore be understood not as a source of objective truth, but as a means of accessing situated knowledge and lived experience.

Largely, the discussion positions storytelling as a necessary, yet insufficient tool in anti-corruption efforts. Its primary strength lies in its ability to shape meanings, challenge norms and amplify lived experiences. Its impact, however, is contingent on the broader institutional and social environment in which it operates. For storytelling to contribute to meaningful anti-corruption outcomes, it must be integrated with structural reforms, accountability mechanisms and participatory governance processes. In this sense, storytelling is most effective not as a standalone intervention, but as part of a multi-level strategy that addresses both the cultural and institutional dimensions of corruption.

9. Recommendations

Building on the findings of the current study, the following recommendations emphasise that storytelling should not be used as a standalone intervention, but as part of a broader strategy that addresses both social norms and structural constraints in anti-corruption efforts in South Africa.

First, storytelling initiatives should be grounded in context and culturally embedded. From a social constructivist perspective, meanings of corruption are shaped by local experiences, values and social interactions. Therefore, anti-corruption narratives must reflect the lived realities of specific communities, including language, cultural norms and everyday encounters with governance systems. Context-sensitive storytelling is more likely to resonate with audiences and influence how corruption is understood and evaluated (Wheeler 2018). This also requires engaging local actors, such as community leaders, activists and civil society organisations, in co-creating narratives to ensure legitimacy and relevance.

Second, storytelling should be explicitly linked to norm change strategies rather than limited to awareness-raising. As the study demonstrates, awareness alone does not lead to behavioural change unless supported by shifts in what is socially accepted or expected. Anti-corruption storytelling should, therefore, aim to construct and reinforce counter-narratives that challenge the normalisation of corruption while promoting values such as accountability, transparency and collective responsibility. This can be achieved by highlighting stories of resistance, ethical leadership and successful accountability processes, rather than focussing solely on exposure of wrongdoing.

Third, storytelling must be institutionally integrated into broader anti-corruption frameworks. While narratives can reshape perceptions, they are unlikely to produce sustained behavioural change without supportive institutional conditions. Governments and anti-corruption agencies should incorporate storytelling into public communication strategies, civic education programmes and accountability initiatives. For example, insights from public inquiries and whistleblower testimonies can be translated into accessible narratives that connect institutional processes with everyday experiences. This integration helps bridge the gap between formal governance mechanisms and public understanding.

Fourth, there is a need to develop robust and mixed-method evaluation frameworks to assess the impact of storytelling interventions. As identified in the study, measuring behavioural change remains a key challenge. Researchers and practitioners should combine qualitative approaches such as narrative analysis and participatory feedback, with quantitative tools, including surveys and behavioural indicators to track changes over time (Bailey and Tilley 2002; McCall et al. 2021). This will improve methodological rigour and strengthen the evidence base for storytelling in anti-corruption work.

Fifth, ethical considerations must remain central to storytelling practices. Given the sensitive nature of corruption, storytelling initiatives should prioritise informed consent, confidentiality and responsible representation of participants' experiences. There is also a need to avoid reinforcing harm or exposing individuals to risk, particularly in contexts where speaking out against corruption may lead to retaliation. Ethical storytelling should, therefore, balance visibility with protection.

Finally, storytelling should be used to foster participation and collective agency. Participatory storytelling approaches can empower individuals, particularly young people and marginalised groups, to engage in anti-corruption discourse and action. By creating spaces for dialogue and shared reflection, storytelling can help build trust, strengthen civic engagement and encourage collective responsibility for governance outcomes (Walker 2025). However, for such participation to translate into meaningful change, it must be supported by accessible reporting mechanisms and responsive institutions.

10. Conclusion

The current study examined the role of storytelling in anti-corruption efforts in South Africa, focussing on both its potential and its limitations. The findings show that storytelling is not merely a communication tool, but a powerful mechanism for shaping how corruption is understood, experienced and contested. Through the lens of social constructivism and narrative theory, the study demonstrates that corruption is socially embedded and that storytelling contributes to the construction and transformation of meanings, norms and public perceptions. However, the study also highlights a critical limitation: storytelling alone cannot produce sustained behavioural change. While narratives can raise awareness, foster emotional engagement and challenge the normalisation of corruption, they do not automatically alter the institutional and structural conditions that sustain corrupt practices. The gap between awareness and action remains a central challenge, particularly in contexts where weak institutions, social pressures and economic constraints limit individual agency.

The study, therefore, argues that storytelling's effectiveness depends on its integration into broader anti-corruption strategies. Storytelling is most impactful when it contributes to norm change, reinforces values of accountability and is supported by strong institutional frameworks and opportunities for action. Without these enabling conditions, storytelling risks reinforcing cynicism, rather than promoting change. By reframing storytelling within a wider system of social and institutional transformation, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of anti-corruption strategies in South Africa. It highlights the need to move beyond awareness-based interventions towards approaches that integrate narrative, norms and governance. Future research should further explore how storytelling can be systematically combined with institutional reforms and participatory approaches to support long-term behavioural and societal change.

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'The Hunter [Administrator] Often Becomes the Hunted': Interview plus commentary¹

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1. Introduction

Johann Mettler, easily one of South Africa's most qualified and technocratic city managers, is an Administrator appointed to stabilise dysfunctional municipalities — Mduduzi (KwaZulu-Natal), Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Bay (Eastern Cape) — and was the Municipal Manager at Drakenstein (Western Cape). Mettler is currently the Municipal Manager at the City of Tshwane (Gauteng). The depth and width of experience positions Mettler to provide insightful critique of the existing challenges confronting Administrators combating corruption and malfeasance in municipalities.

Section 139 of the South African Constitution (RSA 1996) empowers a provincial executive to intervene in a local municipality when it cannot, or does not, fulfil its executive obligations. Administrators are tasked with taking over the executive and administrative powers of the local council to rectify service delivery and governance failures. The powers and functions are comprehensive and include:

- Assumption of executive authority
- Administrative management
- Budget and financial control
- Implementation of recovery plans
- Suspension or rescission of decisions
- Staff and human resources management
- Service delivery oversight

2. Understanding the pathology and disengaging the levers

To meaningfully improve the functionality of non- or under-performing municipalities and root out corruption, the Administrator must '*understand the pathology*' of the municipality's collapse. The Administrator must '*recognise the levers*' of sustaining the pathology, summarised by Mettler as the '*lust for power, insatiable greed and unbridled ambition*.' Mettler continues:

The key turning points, in my mind, would be when you can recognise the levers and disengage them. So, you have to understand who is corrupt and target these people. You have to understand where things went wrong and put in the controls because often the controls are just gone, and you have to change people. There is no way that you can reach a turning point, an effective turning point, without human [resource] capacity, identifying those driving the disaster and replacing them or getting them out of the system and putting in people in place that can actually drive the change.

The key is to '*surround yourself with a team of [good] people, in finance, legal, human resources to weed out phantom employees and assist in determining which pockets we must trust and strengthen in service delivery*'. In addition, Mettler alerts to the need to understand why the municipalities are failing at prosecuting wrongdoers in court. In matters of municipalities losing cases against corrupt officials and/or recovering funds, Mettler quizzes whether '*attorneys are not getting proper instructions from the municipality or is information being withheld by the municipality?*'

¹ The commentary reflects the views of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing those of the interviewee or the interviewee's current or former employer.

3. The past in the present and the context of the future intervention horizon

As far back as 2019, joint briefings to Deputy Ministers by the National Treasury and the Department of Cooperative Government comparing Administrator interventions in local government underscored difficulties with “disengaging levers”. The temporary nature of Administrator appointments; reporting (requirements) routed to national and provincial departments (of local government) rather than the Council of the municipality; and a mandate skewed to support, and rehabilitation (Parliamentary Monitoring Group [PMG] 2019) frustrates engagement of the levers. Moreover, once a Council has been dissolved and an Administrator appointed, the Administrator is left with limited capacity. While it is expected from the relevant national or provincial government Departments to support the Administrator, the Departments themselves have limited financial resources and capacity and other priority areas they need to focus on (PMG 2019).

More than half a decade later (2026), Mettler agrees that the temporary nature of appointments and the inadequate support are meaningful impediments to achieve results. Maladministration and corruption occur over a lengthy period of time; undoing and dismantling it takes much longer. An Administrator, Mettler advises, needs at least a full financial year to execute an improved financial system and appoint ethical, competent and experienced senior managers to drive change.

So, for me, it is a structural thing! If a place has been run down and is bankrupt, the province must have the authority to put a team in place and say: For three years, you run this and decide what must happen, with or without the politicians. Because in order to fix a place, you must be able to make decisions and to execute them. If you must still argue with other people in the system or with politicians, then it is a problem. So, I think our interventions as it relates to how you go about fixing a municipality are not strong enough and the bad guys can sense it. They know that you [Administrator] are not going to be here for an extended period—six months or for three months or a year, maximum—and then you must go. They must just survive you for that period. In my view, if a Council has been dissolved, it must remain dissolved until the next elections to fix the place.

The ‘use of traditional methods of investigations, criminal and civil actions, disciplinary actions and tightening governance measures have limited effect as they fail to send strong messages that wrongful acts and behaviour is under scrutiny’. The limited utility and effectiveness of traditional methods combined with weak investigative and oversight systems compounds failure, that is, the method and system fail in ‘resisting and stopping illicit economies and illegal activities’, entrenching them further, instead.

4. Complicating future intervention horizons further

Mettler does not mince his words when talking about the corruption he encountered at municipal level. For him, it is firstly about ‘individuals that benefit’, and while there are some instances where ‘institutions benefit political parties’, Mettler ‘[does] not necessarily draw a connection between the corruption and the institutions’. However, Mettler does

...draw it, very clearly, between those that associate themselves with a particular party, and the space they occupy either within the party or within the municipality. So, it is about those that are at the head of those institutions, how they use state resources to enable and ensconce themselves. This is about sufficient patronage to ensconce their position and to make space also for those in agreement. They form a cohort of thieves or a band of looters that will come together and then loot an institution. Looting will enable them to win elections within their parties via buying votes that you need cash for.

Although patronage assists parties in creating clientelist networks to sustain their electoral support, it extends beyond democracy for sale. Patronage affords party leaders with the resources to not only maintain the survival of their political parties but also offer ‘selective benefits’ to party leaders and activists in return for loyalty to the party or other advantages (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2024, 457).

Administrators have access to a variety of institutional, operational and policy tools to weed out the corrupt with undue influence and replace them and recover funds. But the ‘deliberate running down’ of internal controls is of major concern for Mettler. Mettler reports: ‘Key positions are not filled’ and ‘nobody is there to oversee that a certain process is running properly. Or there would be somebody who is acting in that position or acting two positions above their pay grade’. Oversight and applying key legislation like the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) (2003)—regulating the supply chain process—must be managed by senior staff, as well as Council and the municipal Public Accounts Committee. Failure to do so, Mettler asserts, ‘will lead to unlawful outcomes such as in Nelson Mandela Bay, where there was a period when there was no competitive bidding done [and] everything was done by deviation’.

5. Mining data and expanding horizons

As Administrator, Mettler points to the benefits of mining the data and information ‘already’ in the system. In most cases, the appointment of an Administrator would have been preceded by an ‘investigation or audit of some kind that capture the instances of non-compliance—there might even be a report by the provincial government or instances of existing cases already under investigation’. Provincial governments have a ‘*real stake*’ in addressing transgressions. They are ‘*constitutionally enjoined to support municipalities*’ and must intervene where necessary. They are also under pressure from the legislatures to report on what they are doing to address municipal malfeasance. However, Mettler cautions:

It is also tricky, because most times the municipality is politically also run by the same provincial party. So, there is also a trade-off where you would now have to decide: Okay, I am going to rely more on the province than the local party representatives, because you know somebody... So, one must make a trade-off to say: Okay, let me first just rely on the province and then as you start to understand the local dynamic, you can then say there a few good guys here, but that is the tricky part because as an outsider you will never know who knows who. You just won't know, but when you chase these people and go up against them, it [the situation] must change. The change could be in improved service delivery, contracts cancelled, funds recovered, prosecutions initiated, policy fixes, etcetera.

6. Whistleblowing and the criminal justice system: Expanding horizons?

Over and above formal investigations, Mettler invests and encourages investigation of the allegations of whistleblowers and community members fingering specific individuals living beyond their means or benefitting unduly from tenders.

For whistleblowers, certainly there must be institutional support not only from the municipality, but also from the broader state, because there is nothing that we can do without the whistleblower. Whistleblowers must know that they are safe and secure when they make their statements, and that their confidentiality will be protected. The implicated institution and its own whistleblowing system must be beyond reproach. Things must not leak, but that is not the case in all institutions. Whistleblowers need institutional support also from the criminal justice system. Because [when] they are exposed, they will be persecuted by those that are threatened.

Reflecting on his present position as Municipal Manager of the City of Tshwane, Mettler reports of his firsthand experience of the unresponsiveness of the criminal justice system supporting ethical administrators.

I now know here in this city where I am now [Tshwane], which police station I must just avoid in certain cases and so, I must go directly to the provincial Hawks. Our criminal justice system is a very important component of the support that ethical administrators would need, and they are not as responsive or effective as they should be.

7. Communication, community and expanding horizons

Other sources of information about corruption that can be tapped, Mettler says, include the opposition parties and the business community. Moreover, Administrators must plan for the deluge of information from people who were disregarded by the municipality in the past.

You must have a system that you develop. This is what my “Recovery Plan” looks like, and this is how I am going to deal with all this information that is coming. So, you must plot that into your Plan so that you can devise a sustainable and effective Recovery Plan.

Strongly aligned to this, and emphasised by Mettler, is the importance of a ‘*good communication channel with the community*’ be it ‘*interest groups, business chambers, residents’ associations or community safety forums*’. The 2019 review mentioned above confirms Mettler’s view. In terms of Section 139, the “involvement of communities, local business and civil society was crucial for the success of the intervention” (PMG 2019). The review continues: “Most interventions were characterised by a complete breakdown in communication between the local citizens and the municipality” underscoring the need for incoming Administrators to “regain the trust of the community” (PMG 2019).

8. Safeguarding evidence and expanding horizons

Safeguarding evidence is of paramount importance because implicated personnel will conceal and destroy incriminating evidence. In other instances, Mettler highlights, there will be no paper trail. A good example of this are illegal electricity connections done in collusion with corrupt municipal officials. On-site inspections are needed to identify the illegal users and ‘*develop the evidence in retrospect*’ by installing water and electricity meters and retroactively billing them for the period the business has been operating.

9. Conclusion

Whilst never the victim of death threats, Mettler was suspended as Municipal Manager and spent a significant amount of his own money defending himself against charges. Countless ethical officials have had similar experiences leading in many instances—a gross understatement—to destroyed careers and financial ruin. Mettler warns that ‘*risks and reprisals are very real*’ for ethical officials, and in the case of the Administrator, the ‘*hunter often becomes the hunted*’. Unlike the Chief Executive Officer of a company, ‘*you cannot take out professional indemnity insurance and trade union support is unavailable at: Administrator-level*’.

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'The Civil Service has become a Graveyard for Competent and Ethical Officials': Interview plus commentary¹

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1. Introduction

Anti-corruption discourse in South Africa has frequently focused on institutional reform, procurement regulation, forensic investigations and the prosecution of wrongdoing. Yet considerably less attention has been given to the lived experiences of public officials who resist political pressure within governance systems shaped by patronage, factionalism and asymmetrical accountability (Labik Amanquandor 2024).

A senior public official, who asked to remain anonymous, resisted political pressure during a major emergency procurement process and argues that anti-corruption systems in South Africa continue to place disproportionate accountability on administrators, while failing to adequately address political interference and patronage. Reflecting on the events that led to suspension, prolonged litigation, reputational damage and severe financial strain, the interviewee maintains that procurement systems become especially vulnerable during periods of crisis and emergency intervention.

The official served as accounting officer of a state-owned infrastructure entity during an environmental crisis in one of South Africa's provinces. While acknowledging the urgency of the crisis, the interviewee became increasingly concerned about pressure from political actors to direct substantial emergency funding toward a predetermined technological solution that, according to the official, had not undergone sufficient testing or lawful procurement processes.

The interview revealed how corruption may manifest not only through completed financial transactions, but through attempted interference, coercive influence, retaliatory investigations and institutional intimidation directed at officials who resist politically connected interests.

2. The environmental crisis and the politics of procurement

The events described in the interview unfolded during a period of environmental crisis in one of South Africa's provinces, when public pressure for rapid intervention created an environment of urgency within the responsible public institution. Emergency contexts frequently require accelerated procurement processes and extraordinary state responses. However, these conditions can also create opportunities for political interference, weakened oversight, and irregular decision-making (Kuwali 2024).

The interviewee explained that the relevant department sought to direct emergency funding toward the political authority's preferred solution. While acknowledging the seriousness of the crisis and the need for intervention, the official became concerned that the proposed response was narrowly focussed on a single technological approach, rather than a broader range of interventions. According to the interviewee:

Emergency intervention requires multiple options, including infrastructure upgrades and demand management, but none of these were seriously considered.

The official also argued that the technology being promoted had not been adequately tested within the South African context, yet pressure mounted to ensure that the institution allocated a significant proportion of the available funding toward that specific intervention. The interviewee described receiving quotations from a service provider that had not been formally briefed through the institution's procurement processes. More concerning, the quotations were allegedly addressed to the executive authority's office first before being copied to the entity itself. This raised immediate concerns regarding procurement interference and the blurring of lines between political

¹ To protect the interviewee's anonymity, certain identifying contextual details have been generalised or omitted without altering the substance of the events described. The accompanying commentary reflects the views of the author solely and should not be interpreted as representing those of the interviewee or the interviewee's current or former employer.

oversight and administrative implementation.

The official interpreted this as evidence that the procurement outcome was effectively predetermined. Rather than allowing technical evaluations and lawful procurement systems to guide decision-making, the process appeared to be driven externally through political influence. Public procurement systems are designed to ensure transparency, fairness and value for money. However, the interview demonstrates how emergency procurement may become vulnerable when political pressure overrides institutional process and oversight mechanisms weaken (Ambe and Badenhorst-Weiss 2012).

3. Resisting political pressure

The interviewee described the decision to resist the proposed procurement arrangement as both professional and ethical. As accounting officer, the official believed there was a legal and governance obligation to protect the institution and ensure compliance with procurement legislation. Therefore, the official instructed the administration to pursue an open tender process that would consider multiple solutions rather than privileging a single provider or technology.

For the interviewee, this became the turning point in the conflict. The interview reveals how governance resistance frequently occurs within systems characterised by informal pressure rather than explicit written instruction. The official recalled conversations with political intermediaries and advisors who allegedly indicated that cooperation would reduce political pressure, while resistance would lead to institutional consequences.

According to the interviewee:

I was explicitly told that if I simply allocated the funds as instructed, the executive authority would “be off my back”.

Recognising that the situation was escalating, the official began preserving documentary evidence, including SMS messages and audio recordings of conversations with senior intermediaries. These recordings were not initially intended for public release but were collected as a form of self-protection.

The interview highlights how ethical resistance within politically contested institutions often depends on individual officials willing to enforce governance boundaries, despite significant personal and professional risk.

4. Retaliation, suspension and malicious investigations

The institutional reprisals experienced by the official following resistance to political pressure constitute one of the most striking dimensions of the narrative. The interviewee described being suspended without charges, subjected to prolonged disciplinary processes and forced into expensive legal battles over several years. Criminal and civil proceedings were reportedly initiated but ultimately failed.

The official recalled:

I won through the labour dispute mechanisms and the courts, but only after years of financial and emotional strain.

The interviewee estimated personal legal costs at more than R2 million and described nearly three years without stable income. The consequences extended beyond finances. The official reported severe reputational damage, loss of residential property (home) and the emotional toll of rebuilding a professional identity and brand-new home after years of institutional conflict.

Beyond the legal and professional consequences, the interview also reveals the emotional exhaustion associated with prolonged institutional conflict. Years of litigation, uncertainty, financial instability and reputational attack fundamentally altered the official's personal and professional life. These experiences reflect broader patterns identified in South African whistleblowing research, where individuals who expose corruption frequently experience institutional retaliation, professional isolation, reputational harm, financial hardship and inadequate legal and institutional protection (Calitz 2023; Radulović 2023).

The interview also referred to ‘malicious investigations’. According to the official, disciplinary processes, forensic investigations and legal proceedings become weaponised against ethical officials who obstruct politically connected interests.

The official argued:

We urgently need scrutiny of malicious investigations. These are often used to remove ethical officials and waste public resources.

Investigations remain essential accountability tools within democratic systems, however, the interview demonstrates how politically motivated or strategically weaponised ‘malicious investigations’ undermine accountability and institutional legitimacy. The interviewee proposed stronger oversight mechanisms to evaluate the costs, motivations and outcomes of prolonged investigations—‘malicious investigations’, in particular—initiated against public officials.

5. Procurement governance and institutional boundaries

A central theme emerging from the interview concerns the contested relationship between political authority and administrative autonomy. While executive authorities are expected to provide political oversight and policy direction, accounting officers remain responsible for implementation, financial management and procurement compliance. The interviewee, however, points out that these distinctions are frequently undermined in practice, reflecting broader governance tensions identified during state capture, wherein informal political networks weakened institutional autonomy and procurement integrity (Chipkin and Swilling 2018).

The official describes service providers communicating directly with political principals instead of following institutional procurement channels, while the principal’s advisor openly discussed patronage and political fundraising. The institution’s governing authority was drawn into procurement discussions. According to the interviewee:

The governing authority was not supposed to be discussing a procurement strategy. That’s purely an administrative matter.

The interviewee maintained that all institutional processes remained legally compliant and attracted no adverse audit findings. However, the official also argued that legal compliance alone offered insufficient protection once political interference became entrenched.

6. The collapse of the proposed transaction

The contested transaction never ultimately proceeded, reports the interviewee. According to the interviewee, institutional resistance, media scrutiny and evidence submitted to law-enforcement authorities prevented the implementation of the executive authority’s preferred technology.

The official explained:

The specific technology promoted by the executive authority was never implemented, largely because the matter became public, and I had referred the matter to law enforcement authorities.

Governance systems often focus primarily on completed corruption and financial loss. Yet the interview demonstrates that attempted interference, procurement manipulation and coercive political influence may still cause severe institutional harm even where unlawful transactions are ultimately prevented.

This case illustrates the limitations of anti-corruption frameworks that rely primarily on completed transactions as the basis for accountability. Ethical resistance may successfully prevent corruption yet still expose officials to significant retaliation without generating corresponding legal consequences for those who initiated the pressure.

7. Asymmetrical accountability and political patronage

Reflecting on the broader implications of the case, the interviewee repeatedly returned to the uneven distribution of accountability within South Africa’s governance system. While administrators frequently bear the legal, financial and reputational consequences of governance failures, political actors often remain insulated from equivalent scrutiny or consequence management.

According to the interviewee,

There must be consequences for politicians.

The official argued that existing legislation effectively presumes that corruption ‘starts and ends’ with accounting officers and administrators, despite the central role political actors frequently and regularly play in procurement pressure, appointments and institutional interference.

The interviewee argued that political appointments based on loyalty, rather than competence create reciprocal obligations between politicians and administrators. Individuals appointed through patronage are indebted to political principals, while those who resist political influence are disciplined, suspended and dismissed.

8. Transferable lessons for anti-corruption practice

The interview provides several practical insights into institutional resistance and anti-corruption governance. The official emphasised the importance of procedural compliance, documented communication, written instructions and open tender processes as safeguards against irregular influence. ‘*You must decide early that your reputation is not for sale*’ accords centrality to personal ethical clarity.

Not all administrators possess the financial resources, emotional resilience or institutional support required to survive prolonged retaliation. Without stronger institutional safeguards, ethical resistance is reputationally, professionally, financially, socially and personally destructive—all of which takes many years to repair and restore.

9. Conclusion

This narrative fundamentally challenges simplistic assumptions that corruption is primarily an administrative problem, underscoring instead the systemic relationship between political patronage, institutional interference and asymmetrical accountability. Governance failures, the interviewee demonstrates, are often embedded within informal networks of influence, reciprocal obligation and political protection, rather than isolated acts of individual misconduct. Anti-corruption systems may unintentionally discourage ethical resistance when officials who refuse unlawful instructions face severe professional, financial and personal consequences, while political actors remain comparatively insulated from accountability. Procurement reform cannot be decoupled from structural accountability mechanisms that apply equally to executive authority and administrators and extend protections to lawful and ethical officials who resist improper pressure, rather than punishing them, at the expense of the taxpayer—and not the executive authority—over a prolonged period, harshly and maliciously.

The official laments that ‘*the civil service is the graveyard for competent and ethical officials*’. Unless governance systems nurture and protect ethical resistance as vigorously as they pursue corruption, the public sector will continue to destroy and lose many of its finest to the grave dug by corrupt officials, and corrupt politicians too, who with endless public money undermine accountability and institutional legitimacy.

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The Burden of Bearing Witness: South African Journalism, Corruption and the Case for a Protected Fourth Estate

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1. Introduction

In 1954, journalist Henry Nxumalo broke a shop window to get himself arrested so that he could report first-hand on prison abuse. Inside, he was kicked and thrashed every day and called a ‘kaffir’ (Nxumalo, 1954, as cited in Harber 2017).

Nxumalo was stabbed to death in 1957 on his way to meet a source as part of his investigation into an illegal abortion racket. His murderer was never found. South Africa’s pioneer of watchdog investigative journalism paid the ultimate sacrifice for exposing the corrupt and powerful.

Despite great personal damage to their lives, families, relationships and mental health, generations of South African journalists have followed in Nxumalo’s footsteps, unearthing human rights abuses, the theft of public resources, naming the people responsible and supplying the evidentiary foundations for commissions of inquiry, prosecutions and occasionally resignations and dismissals.

I have worked in several South African newsrooms since I started as a cub reporter at the anti-apartheid movement-funded *South* newspaper in the early nineties. I reported on horrors like the Boipatong massacre (17 June 1992) at *The Sunday Times* during the days of talks about talks that led to the short-lived euphoria of South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994, and again from 2000–2010, covering South Africa’s national descent into kleptocracy. I witnessed and led a team of journalists who were threatened with being chased into the sea for our coverage of the 2011 local government elections when I was editor of *The Herald* in Port Elizabeth. I now work at *Daily Maverick* as online Day editor and editor of the weekly newspaper *DM168*.

Over 30 years at the coalface of journalism has given me a sobering perspective on my profession’s role as the Fourth Estate. This essay examines the pivotal role of Henry Nxumalo’s successors in exposing corruption from the dying days of apartheid to over three decades of democracy, and the internal flaws and external threats that weaken the watchdog function. The central question it addresses is:

What does the media’s role in combating corruption mean for anti-corruption policies and strategies with respect to improved access, accountability and transparency of the state?

2. Investigative journalism as the first line of accountability

2.1. The 1970s: Muldergate scandal

One of the most far-reaching investigations of the apartheid era was the Muldergate scandal (broke out in 1977), which exposed a clandestine psychological warfare and propaganda operation orchestrated by South Africa’s Department of Information under Minister Connie Mulder and Secretary Eschel Rhodie, approved by Prime Minister BJ Vorster. Between ZAR64 million and ZAR72 million was laundered from the state’s defence budget to buy international influence, including a failed US\$11.3 million bid to purchase *The Washington Star*, and to secretly fund *The Citizen*, a state-controlled newspaper fronted by millionaire Louis Luyt to counter the anti-apartheid *Rand Daily Mail*.

It was the dogged investigation by *Rand Daily Mail* journalists Mervyn Rees, Kitt Katzen and Chris Day that exposed this secret propaganda machine. Adrian Hadland (2005) quoting then *Rand Daily Mail* editor Alistair Sparks recounts that, beyond toppling President BJ Vorster and his heir apparent, Connie Mulder, the scandal ‘shattered the image of leadership in the eyes of the traditionally patriarchal Nationalist folk’ with ‘new tensions and cracks appearing’ as ‘a new leadership... [moved] in a more reformist direction’ (Sparks, cited in Hadland 2005, 133). As Sparks put it: ‘Surely, in a country where the press and the judiciary can still beat the odds to expose a massive government scandal and bring down the most powerful political figures, there must still be hope for the forces of peaceful change’ (Sparks, as cited in Hadland 2005, 133). It was also a foundational demonstration that transparency forced by journalism when the state refused to provide it, is itself an anti-corruption instrument.



2.2. *The 1980s: Death squads and dirty tricks*

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, as the apartheid state resorted to violent repression that no propaganda could perfume, the Afrikaans-language *Vrye Weekblad* and the *Weekly Mail* published investigations that remain landmarks of South African public interest journalism. In 1989, *Weekly Mail* journalist Ivor Powell's interview with death-row prisoner Almond Nofomela and Max du Preez and Jacques Pauw's *Vrye Weekblad* exposé of Dirk Coetzee and the Vlakplaas hit squads, gave the country its first documented account of state-sanctioned assassination. These exposés triggered the Harms Commission (1990), and broader revelations before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-1998) proving that accountability journalism does not merely report on consequences, it creates them.

2.3. *2003: The arms deal and the Hefer Commission*

It was columnist and former *City Press* editor Mondli Makhanya who said the arms deal was the moment our young democracy lost its innocence (Makhanya 2020). Among the first of many arms deal investigations was *The Sunday Times*' exposure by journalists Jessica Bezuidenhout, Mzilikazi wa Afrika, and André Jurgens of the African National Congress (ANC) MP Tony Yengeni's failure to declare a 47 per cent discount on a luxury Mercedes-Benz, from the director of an arms manufacturer while he was chairman of parliament's joint standing committee on defence that led to his conviction and sentencing for fraud in 2003 and a four-month imprisonment in 2006. The support of Yengeni by senior ANC leaders as he entered the prison gates and the celebration of Yengeni's release from prison with an ox slaughter in a Western Cape township previewed the cultural acceptance of corruption in the governing party that was coming.

That loss of innocence was cemented by the Hefer Commission, appointed by President Thabo Mbeki to investigate allegations published in the *City Press* by my then-*Sunday Times* colleague Ranjeni Munusamy, that National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) head Bulelani Ngcuka who was investigating then deputy president Jacob Zuma for arms deal corruption had been an apartheid spy, called Agent RS452.

I was at the *Sunday Times* editorial meeting in September 2003 where editor Mathatha Tsedu heard arguments for and against publishing the story. Tsedu agreed with most of us that it lacked credible evidence and decided not to publish. Munusamy proceeded to take it to *City Press* editor Vusi Mona, who published it.

Journalism scholar Guy Berger's analysis of the incident is unsparing towards the perceived hypocrisy of the journalism profession in terms of political partisanship and uneven treatment of those who break the journalistic code of ethics.

While Mona received wholesale opprobrium from the journalistic fraternity and never returned to the industry, Munusamy, after being suspended from the *The Sunday Times*, was soon rehired by *Business Day*, *This Day* and several other publications, including the *Daily Maverick*, and again, at *The Sunday Times*, at a later stage. Despite her insistence on her non-partisanship, Munusamy also became a spokesperson for the pro-Zuma camp (Berger 2008). While Berger reflected that Munusamy justified her pushing for publication of the unproved allegations against Ngcuka by arguing that it was ethically questionable that *The Sunday Times* had pursued the allegations against Zuma, and not to run those against Ngcuka, Berger interrogates this, stating:

Where questions could be asked, however, was in regard to her extraordinary pushing for publication (and more, of a story whose key claim lacked clear proof), whether she had taken any precautions against being used, and whether her story was in the public interest and not only in the interests of the Zuma camp (Berger 2008, 5).

The allegation that Ngcuka was a spy was rejected by Judge Hefer and proved untrue when Venessa Brereton, a human rights lawyer from Port Elizabeth, confessed that she was Agent RS452. Nonetheless, Ngcuka's career ended, and the Scorpions anti-corruption unit was disbanded in 2009 after Zuma won the ANC presidency at Polokwane. Ultimately, whether unwitting or not, whatever the motive, be it personal or political, the Hefer Commission showed that when journalism is captured by political factions it does not hold power to account. Rather, it serves it.

2.4. *2012: The Marikana Massacre*

On 16 August 2012, South African Police Service officers opened fire on striking platinum miners at Lonmin's mine near Rustenburg, killing 34 people. Most mainstream press repeated the police spokesman's self-defence narrative without speaking to the miners. It took photographer Greg Marinovich and Professor Kate Alexander to return to the killing field and document what really happened at Small *Koppie*, where seventeen miners were shot at close range (Marinovich 2012). Their findings were confirmed by the Farlam Commission. To

date, no police officer has been successfully prosecuted. The toll on Marinovich and Alexander was severe. Alexander's offices were broken into, electric fences were cut, laptops were stolen and Dropbox data was stolen (Davis 2022). Marinovich moved his family to the United States after being awarded a Harvard fellowship in 2013 (Davis 2022). This is the price paid by those who tell the truth about what the state does when no one is watching.

2.5. 2017: *The Gupta Leaks*

The Gupta Leaks, comprising more than 200 000 emails, published from June 2017 by *amaBhungane*, *Daily Maverick* and *News24*, documented in granular detail how the Gupta family and their political allies systematically looted Eskom, Transnet and the Passenger Rail Agency (amaBhungane 2017). At *Daily Maverick*, Susan Comrie and Pauli van Wyk's six-part McKinsey Dossier established the specific mechanism by which McKinsey and Gupta-linked Trillian had stripped ZAR1.6 billion from Eskom (Comrie and Van Wyk 2017). The Zondo Commission's 6 000 pages of findings were substantially built on this evidentiary record. McKinsey repaid ZAR870 million to Transnet. The two whistleblowers who first leaked the emails, dubbed John and Stan, to protect their identities, fled South Africa and remain in exile. As Van Wyk put it: 'An extraordinary return on investment to our investigative journalism donors' (Van Wyk, as cited in 2021). When investigative journalism that follows the money trail of the corrupt is followed up by law enforcement, it benefits the fiscus by MDIF returning plundered public funds and serves every tax-paying citizen.

2.6. 2020–2026: *An unhealthy state*

Today, accountability remains partial. No major Gupta convictions, no extradition, no prosecution for the Marikana massacre. The twenty-first-century version of apartheid's hit squads turns its weapons, guns, social media chatbots, paid influencers on those who raise the red flags of corruption. Jeff Wicks' reporting on the assassination of Babita Deokaran, shot twelve times outside her home on 23 August 2021, showed the lethal stakes of exposing Covid-19 personal protection equipment (PPE) procurement fraud at Tembisa Hospital worth approximately ZAR850 million (Wicks 2026).

Investigative reporting by Mark Heywood and *Maverick Citizen* showed that Covid-19 corruption extended beyond PPE contracts to inflated school sanitisation spending, irregular procurement and the costly, delayed Gauteng field-hospital programme, evidence of how emergency measures created new channels for waste and patronage (Heywood 2020).

The Special Investigating Unit's (SIU) later recovery efforts showed that some of this reporting did translate into consequences. After a 2022 special tribunal judgment set aside ZAR431 million in Gauteng Department of Education school-sanitation contracts, service providers and individuals linked to Chachulani Group Investment Holdings agreed to repay ZAR25 million of the ZAR40 million they had received (SIU 2026).

3. Threats to the watchdog

3.1. *Watching the watchdogs: Internal failures*

Journalism's watchdog role is severely undermined when the profession succumbs to ethical lapses, personal biases and institutional capture. The South African Revenue Services (SARS) Rogue Unit affair is the starkest example. Between 2014 and 2016, the *Sunday Times* published false allegations that SARS operated an illegal intelligence unit spying on politicians, relying on politically compromised sources (Cowan 2020). Senior officials Ivan Pillay and Johann van Loggerenberg were suspended; the institution's capacity to pursue Zuma-aligned figures was dismantled. The Press Ombudsman found the reporting 'inaccurate, misleading, and unfair' and ordered a full retraction and apology (Press Council of South Africa 2015). SARS publicly apologised to those it had wronged (SARS 2022). Investigative journalist Pearlle Joubert resigned from *The Sunday Times* in 2015, saying she was 'not willing to be party to practices...which I verily believed to have been unethical and immoral' (Joubert, as cited in *The Media Online* 2015).

In February 2021, *Daily Maverick* published a column by Jacques Pauw, co-founder of the *Vrye Weekblad*, exposé of apartheid's death squads, describing his wrongful arrest at a Cape Town restaurant. CCTV footage at the V&A Waterfront contradicted his account. *Daily Maverick* associate editor Richard Poplak's forensic correction, published under the instruction to 'first, correct; then retract; then apologise; then tell the truth', established that the restaurant had not called the police (Poplak 2021). Pauw attributed his mis-recollection to intoxication. *Daily Maverick* retracted. As the late radio host and commentator Eusebius McKaiser observed: 'If Jacques wasn't white

and male, responses to his drunken lies would very likely NOT treat this as a morally or ethically “complex” situation’ (McKaiser 2021, cited in Feketah 2021, original emphasis). *Daily Maverick*’s willingness to correct the record publicly was the right response. Applying the same standard regardless of a journalist’s celebrity or race is the permanent obligation.

Finally, the watchdog function is brought into disrepute when oversight bodies are perceived to protect their own. The South African National Editors’ Forum (SANEF), the body who represents editors and upholds editorial standards was accused of avoiding launching an inquiry into former *Sunday World* and *Sunday Times* editor Makhudo Sefara after former *GroundUp*’s editor Nathan Geffen and veteran journalist Anton Harber had raised concerns about *Sunday World* receiving funds from the National Lotteries Commission (NLC) for advertising.

Sefara was appointed editor of the *Sunday Times* by Arena in 2024, and elected SANEF chair in February 2025. In April 2026, Sefara stepped aside as chair after being named in a SIU statement linking him to a 2018 lottery grant of ZAR1.5 million paid by the NLC to Todi Media, of which ZAR550 000 was passed to Unscripted Communications, a company solely owned by Sefara, for organising a one-day media training workshop attended by fewer than 50 people. Sefara was placed on special leave from *The Sunday Times* by Arena around the same time (Geffen 2026).

An independent inquiry commissioned by SANEF, conducted by advocate Ofentse Motlhasedi dated 30 June 2026, cleared Sefara of breaching SANEF’s code of conduct, however, Motlhasedi found that neither SANEF’s constitution nor its code of conduct expressly obliged members to disclose outside financial interests, and recommended that future nominees for senior SANEF positions be required to do so (Geffen 2026).

Although the legal maxim “innocent until proven guilty” must be respected, a press freedom body cannot credibly demand accountability from the state while appearing unable, or unwilling, to hold its own to account.

That tension was sharpened rather than resolved by the SIU’s public rebuttal, which accused SANEF of misrepresenting its position: SANEF’s statement, the SIU said, ‘gives the impression that the SIU has exonerated Sefara as a beneficiary of NLC funds. This is not a reflection of the letter sent to his lawyers’ (Geffen 2026). The SIU noted that while Sefara’s company Unscripted Communications was never itself a subject of its investigation, the grant money had nonetheless been traced into Sefara’s business and personal bank accounts.

At its Annual General Meeting (AGM) on 4 July 2026, SANEF sought to clarify that its earlier statement had referred only to the outcome of its own internal inquiry, and had not claimed that the SIU had cleared Sefara. The same AGM statement conceded a more troubling finding: SANEF’s own inquiry had established that Sefara was in fact made aware, a few days before the training, that the funding came from the NLC and that he had ‘repeatedly told the organisation that he was not aware’ of this. The AGM described the matter as ‘deeply regrettable’ (SANEF 2026). In response, the newly elected leadership resolved to strengthen SANEF’s ethical codes by reviewing its disclosure policy, requiring all members of council and management committee to declare business interests and financial activities upfront and on an ongoing basis (SANEF 2026).

3.2. *Misogyny: The coordinated silencing of women journalists*

One of the fiercest threats to accountability journalism is the sexualised, coordinated abuse of women journalists, designed not to persuade, but to intimidate, discredit and drive them out of public life. According to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation study cited by United Nations (UN) Women, 73% of women journalists have experienced online violence, and one in four has received threats of physical harm (UN Women 2025). Kgomo Modise of *Eyewitness News* described how, after criticising extrajudicial killings during the Senzo Meyiwa trial, a troll pulled childhood photographs from her Facebook account and coupled them with threats of sexual violence against her and her underage niece (Modise cited in UN Women 2025). The documented result is self-censorship. Women journalists retreat from public commentary and withdraw from the public space their work requires (UN Women 2025). As William Bird of *Media Monitoring Africa* argues, these attacks are not random cruelty, but a disinformation strategy designed to silence reporting that powerful people want silenced (Bird 2022).

Jacob Zuma’s legal team launched a private prosecution against *News24* legal journalist Karyn Maughan in September 2022 following her reporting on Zuma’s medical condition, one of at least twelve legal actions Zuma had launched against journalists (Media Defence 2023; Singh 2023). On 7 June 2023, the Pietermaritzburg High Court unanimously ruled the prosecution an abuse of process, holding that media freedom exists for the public’s benefit (CPJ 2023). That ruling should not have been necessary. The fact that it was is a measure of how far powerful men will go to stop a woman journalist from doing her job.

3.3. *The platform oligopoly and the hollowing out of the industry*

The threats to journalism as a watchdog are not just political, they are also deeply structural as the business models that support journalism are consistently disrupted by global Big Tech companies like Meta, Google, TikTok and X, OpenAI and other artificial intelligence (AI) platforms which have harvested South African and global news media content and advertising revenue while rewarding outrage, hate and tribalism over sober accountability (Roper 2025). The impact of this advertising revenue loss and digitisation has led to a journalism jobs bloodbath (Daniels 2020). In 2024, *Media24* closed *City Press* and other titles; *Daily Maverick* made its first-ever staff cuts and the South African public broadcaster projected a ZAR590 million loss.

South Africa's interest in local news, on the other hand, stands at 60 per cent, the highest of any country surveyed in the Reuters Annual Digital Journalism report (Roper 2025). The demand is there, however, the business model to supply it has been systematically destroyed. The biggest tragedy is that the municipal beat where most everyday corruption operates is now almost entirely unwatched.

The damage caused by social media and AI tech platforms is, however, not just economic. With no need to abide by ethical codes of conduct that the South African news media abides by through membership of the Press Council and Broadcast Complaints Commission of SA, the platforms monetise misinformation, polarising emotion and unverified AI slop that has dangerous real-life repercussions.

The July 2021 unrest, for example, which killed more than 350 people and caused an estimated ZAR50 billion in damage, was substantially fuelled by coordinated WhatsApp and Twitter campaigns by politically connected actors who understood the power of algorithmic amplification (Moyo 2024).

4. What this means for anti-corruption policy

The evidence above is not merely a history of journalism. It is an argument for structural reform. The media can only fulfil its role of improving state access, accountability and transparency if three categories of policy change are enacted and enforced.

First, as Platform to Protect Whistleblowers in Africa (PPLAAF) (2026) recommends, access to information must become enforceable, not aspirational. South Africa's Promotion of Access to Information Act (RSA 2000) has been consistently undermined by non-compliance and slow enforcement. Freedom of information frameworks must be extended to cover state-owned enterprises, entities receiving public funds and procurement processes precisely where the Gupta Leaks, and the NLC Lotto scandal unfolded. States must mandate the proactive publication of asset disclosures, public budgets, procurement procedures, beneficial ownership registers and lobbying records in accessible digital formats. Without genuine access rights, investigative journalism is forced to rely on whistleblowers who face lethal consequences, as Babita Deokaran and the Gupta Leaks sources, John and Stan, demonstrate.

Second, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018) urges that whistleblowers and journalists must be legally and physically protected, not merely rhetorically. The (RSA 2000a) has repeatedly failed those it was designed to protect. A revised framework must include judicial oversight of whistleblower identities, criminalisation of source exposure and mandatory physical security assessments for journalists under threat. Strategic Law against Public Participation (SLAPP) suits, of the kind Jacob Zuma deployed against Karyn Maughan across twelve separate actions, must be specifically legislated against (Media Defence 2023). Crimes against journalists and whistleblowers must not go unpunished. No police officer has been prosecuted for the Marikana massacre, and Babita Deokaran was murdered because the state failed to protect a witness whose testimony it needed. These are not separate problems; they are the same problem, wearing different clothes.

Third, the platform oligopoly must be treated as a democratic emergency, not a market inconvenience. The Competition Commission's two-year investigation into how search engines, social media platforms and AI firms affect the sustainability of South Africa's news media, that is, the Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry (Competition Commission South Africa 2025; Markovitz 2025a) culminated in a final settlement that still leaves journalism financially vulnerable.

As Markovitz (2025b) observes, it means 'South Africa will therefore have multiple, purpose-specific media and journalism funds rather than a unified national mechanism'. Any platform may vary or discontinue a remedy on just twenty days' written notice (Markovitz 2025b), meaning even the ZAR688 million Google settlement remains contingent on continued corporate goodwill rather than legal obligation. What must be supported is SANEF's proposed Journalism Fund SA, envisaged on a multi-stakeholder governance model (Markovitz 2025b). Markovitz notes that the Commission stops short of directing any platform funding to support the Press Council or the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa, leaving these self-regulatory bodies financially unsupported despite the settlement's reliance on them for its own legitimacy (Markovitz 2025a, 2025b).

The Forum on Information and Democracy's Working Group on the Sustainability of Journalism (Padania et al. 2021) notes that if governments committed just 0.1 per cent of GDP to journalism sustainability, the resulting global total would run into the tens of billions of US dollars annually. Read against South Africa's Commission settlement, in which even the ZAR688 million Google package remains a voluntary, revocable arrangement, this suggests the missing piece is not capacity, but a legislative mandate.

There are also other initiatives that could make a difference. The government could save journalism jobs by incentivising ethical journalism that acts as a watchdog against corruption on behalf of citizens by creating tax exemptions for media houses that are bona fide members of the South African Press Council, just as it does for churches, which are not disrupted by the tech oligopolies and make huge tax-exempt profits.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation needs to be run as a public broadcaster in the public interest. Its financial stabilisation and insulation from political control is urgent, as it is the primary source of news for tens of millions of South Africans who cannot access online journalism.

Finally, the algorithmic amplification of disinformation that fuelled the July 2021 unrest and ongoing xenophobic mobilisation today, must be addressed through content moderation regulation with enforceable standards and genuine consequences for platforms that choose violent hate-bait over truth.

5. Conclusion

Henry Nxumalo broke a shop window in 1954 to get the story. He was kicked and thrashed for it, published what he found and was murdered three years later on his way to meet another source. Seventy years on, Babita Deokaran was shot twelve times outside her home, because she had offered to testify about Covid PPE fraud. The Gupta Leaks sources, John and Stan, are living in exile because they gave journalism the evidence it needed to hold state capture to account. A *Daily Maverick* colleague, Rebecca Davis, spent eight months documenting Social Development Minister Sisisi Tolashe's corruption (Davis 2025; April–May 2026). Davis filed eight stories and watched the Minister get fired by the President on 13 May this year.

In each case, the act was the same: submitting the evidence, following it wherever it goes and bearing the consequences.

These stories answer the central question this essay has addressed. The media's role in combating corruption is not supplementary to anti-corruption policy, it is one of its essential preconditions. The Muldergate scandal that shifted the apartheid state toward reform was driven by journalism, not by parliamentary oversight. The Zondo Commission that documented the full scale of state capture was built on an evidentiary record assembled by journalists, not by prosecutors. The ministers, officials and corporations that repaid public funds did so because journalism made the alternative, continued concealment, impossible. Transparency enforced by journalism is the mechanism through which accountability becomes real.

Improved access, accountability and transparency of the state require more than policy documents. They require enforceable access-to-information laws, physical and legal protections for those who use them, a funded and independent press free from both political control and platform capture and a journalism profession rigorous enough to hold itself to the same standard it demands of everyone else.

Henry Nxumalo broke a shop window to get the story. We, his successors, are still breaking windows. We are not done yet.

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A Practitioner Essay: Small Town, Big Shakes

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1. Introduction

I am a registered Professional Town and Regional Planner (Pr. Plan A/940/1997), and am presently the Chief Executive Officer of the Atlantis Special Economic Zone for Green Technologies in the Western Cape. I have played a key role in several landmark initiatives, including Cape Town's first post-democracy Metropolitan Plan and South Africa's national urban renewal strategy. At National Treasury's Government Technical Advisory Centre (GTAC), I helped launch a ZAR10 billion fund for township revitalisation—The Neighbourhood Development Partnership Grant (NDPG). I consider myself a creative, collaborative and results-driven leader, passionate about sustainable urban infrastructure, green technology and the green economy.

2. Formative years and values

Before my story about corruption—Small Town, Big Shakes—I must say a few words about my upbringing and my values. Born in 1965, I grew up in a liberal environment and my parents emphasised, through their actions and admonishments, the importance of engaging everyone with respect regardless of race or background. As the youngest in the family, I experienced, in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s, my older siblings actively engaged in the anti-apartheid movement through student organisation, the labour movement and the arts.

In 1980, I was offered the opportunity to study in Swaziland—now Eswatini—at a school specifically established to show that races and religions could work and live together. The school was Waterford Kamhlaba. Kamhlaba was an additional name given by King Sobhuza II in the 1970s. With his beautiful and poetic use of the Swazi language, the context of its use referenced the fact that the school represented the people of all the earth. The place for all on earth has famous alumni, including the children of Winnie and Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond and Leah Tutu. During my time at Waterford Kamhlaba, it became part of global movement of schools (The United World Colleges movement—which continues to thrive and grow to this day) aimed at promoting international understanding and peace through education. It was an incredible and life-changing experience.

This education and experience, along with seeing the erosion of dignity caused by apartheid, awoke in me a strong desire to contribute positively to transforming South Africa into a just and equitable society, less as politician than technocrat. Upon my return to South Africa from Swaziland, I sought a university qualification to professionally contribute to building a future South Africa. I graduated in 1990 with a Masters in City and Regional Planning that was preceded by an undergraduate degree in Economics, Geographical and Environmental Sciences. The year 1990 marked the breaking of flood gates in terms of the inevitable, gut wrenching and sometimes chaotic, process towards the 1994 democratic elections. It was an incredible time! The post-1994 era gave free reign to utopian thinking of the future, but in retrospect, at some distance from the scale of need and desperation of the poor Black majority. The idealism and utopianism were, also in retrospect, radically disrupted by the necessities, vagaries, vicissitudes and betrayals of the post-apartheid statecraft and democratic reconstruction.

3. My story about corruption

In 1997, I was invited to join a new consulting company established by two planning colleagues. Both colleagues were progressive planners with deep roots in anti-apartheid activism and as “non-Whites”, grew up under the boot and garrison of a violent and ruthless state as well as the human devastation wrought by apartheid's spatial engineering. This is a legacy that remains a daily struggle—apartheid is stubbornly post-apartheid too. One of the prominent architects of the apartheid and the post-apartheid, the late National Party President de Klerk writes in his Autobiography, titled *Last Trek-New Beginnings*:

[I] committed myself and the [outgoing] government not to accept any agreements that did not offer reasonable provision for the prevention of domination and the effective protection of minorities; the protection of property...a market-oriented economy with free enterprise and fiscal responsibility; constitutionally protected devolution of power to regional and local governments, and a form of power-sharing (1999, 233).

Reflecting on the outcome of the “Last Trek's New Beginnings”, De Klerk, who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Mandela, beams:



If little has changed in the white suburbs of Pretoria, it is also true that almost as little has changed in its sprawling black townships. Workers still rise before dawn and pile into minibus taxis, buses, and commuter trains to make their way to their jobs in the city, those who are lucky enough to have jobs. They return in the evenings to their crowded match-box houses. Most of the old problems – crime, poverty, inadequate services, poor education, and unemployment – remain (De Klerk 1999, 233).

The company we founded was MCA Urban and Environmental Planners—a private technical advisory company focussing on green urban infrastructure policy, planning and development. MCA was a small company whose partners were passionately committed—and remain committed—to the values of redress, social justice, equity and democracy; all of which we aimed to realise via value-led and principled consultation informed by the Constitution (1996) and within the four corners of the law. Setting up the company was a real leap of faith. We were young, idealistic and anything was possible in the frenzy and fantasy of democratic reconstruction. The journey travelled in establishing the company and building it up is a story on its own—but we were fortunate to work on and contribute to many of the leading and ground-breaking initiatives in urban development happening in the late 1990s (up to around 2009).

In 2003, government was disbursing considerable funding for programmes to begin tackling apartheid's spatial and economic inequality. As an idealistic and passionate city and regional planner, we aimed at making a difference in regenerating townships and township economies. After the usual competitive bidding process, MCA was appointed to work on an urban development project in a mid-sized municipality (Municipality) in the Northern Cape province.

From the start of the project, we were united by our shared desire to harness the power of place-making/urban planning to guide and shape lasting change and transformation of the built environment. This desire fed on our drive as students and the university experiences in the 1980s, when the state unleashed deadly force under two states of emergency in 1985 and 1986.

For our small company, the project was a milestone contract—a unique opportunity to put ideas into action. The funding for the project was from the national treasury's NDPG to the Municipality, and specifically for the revitalisation of the township. When we were appointed, we were informed by the Municipal employee tasked to run and oversee the project that the decision had been made, whilst considering the bids that the project must be shared 50/50 with local companies on the basis that we had to help build local skills and capacity. We did not question this—in fact, we saw it as an opportunity to contribute and help build skills in this sector. This was the developmental state in action! In retrospect, we should perhaps have questioned the adjudication process and the legal basis for splitting the project award. Our company, however, could not fault the principle of helping to build skills and local capacity.

On being informed of winning the bid (and the arrangement with the local companies), we flew to meet with the municipal officials, present our project plan and approach (and meet the local counterparts). No sooner had we landed on the daily flight from Cape Town than the Mayor called me for a meeting prior to the scheduled engagement with the officials. I reacted to this request with enthusiasm. How positive to meet with a democratically elected ANC Mayor. To me this was democracy in action! In the warm glow of both the developmental state and democracy in action, we thought that the Mayor no doubt wanted to satisfy himself of our credentials, record his expectations of the project and to lend his support to the process—or so we believed. I met the Mayor at a popular fast-food restaurant in the local mall. The Mayor immediately came to the point—the company was to pay a sizeable donation to the ANC via himself. The “donation” was almost exactly the expected project profits. The Mayor also said that the local companies who were to work with us had already banded together to pay their portion, upfront too. I was absolutely floored! My mind went blank as I fumbled for an appropriate response and to hide my utter dismay.

When I eventually found my tongue, I responded, after the long pause, that our company did indeed donate to political parties, including the ANC, however, only through official and transparent fund-raising events and activities. I also said that I would need to get approval from my partners for this. I asked the Mayor to request the “donation” in writing on the party's letterhead for me and my partners to consider. The Mayor left shortly after without interest in the project or our approach. After that, the scheduled meeting with the officials proceeded without any mention of the meeting with the Mayor and the “donation” to the party via him. I met with the representatives of the other companies afterwards. They were all professionals trying to build and grow their businesses. They all complained bitterly of having been “forced” to pay “donations” or be excluded from the project. Some also said this was a regular requirement when winning bids in the Municipality.

Because this was a nationally funded project with funds channelled to the Municipality, I decided to declare the incident of the Mayor and the “donation” to the senior officials in the NDPG office at National Treasury. My intention was to ensure they had knowledge of this and to ensure that no fingers could be pointed to the company if it emerged that other parties had paid to be involved in the project. A few days after reporting the incident, I was (by a chance encounter) introduced to Trevor Manuel, the (former) Minister of Finance. He pulled me aside and said: *‘I heard about the incident in the Municipality and what is going on there. Don’t you worry this is going to be dealt with’*. A week or so thereafter, the Mayor was called to Luthuli House, the ANC party headquarters, and fired.

As it turns out, and as explained by the other companies in the bid, the request for a “donation” from the Mayor was a regular *pattern*. The project continued and we collaborated with the local companies that we partnered with. It was a positive experience. Some Swedish development workers based in the Municipality at the time commended the project and work saying that it met global standards for quality and professionalism. It was an external endorsement we appreciated. However, the cost for the local companies who could not call on a broader range of clients was devastating. One company closed completely.

4. Conclusion: the present and future is in danger

Whilst action was taken in this instance (and provides a good example of how leadership can make an impact), this pattern and approach unfortunately not only persisted, but has grown exponentially over the years in both ambition and impact. Politicians (specifically) demanding payment and misdirecting public funds—to finance their political parties and pay salaries to functionaries—have destroyed municipalities. With it the notion of how a developmental state could use procurement and projects such as ours to build skills and local capability, whilst delivering real value, has been destroyed. What we experienced in Municipality in 2003 was the tip of the iceberg—the early looting and corruption of the democratic developmental state.

Today, we see how organised crime has now also stepped into this “tender” space—with gangs demanding their 30 per cent for local content from contractors. Like with the example of partnering with local companies to build capacity as a positive and developmental step in its own right, the 30 per cent has evolved into a tool for extortion and rent seeking. Localisation through procurement has also been warped, whereby the requirement for a local supplier is used to inflate tender prices—with local politicians taking their cut. One point that I believe is worth making is that in municipal procurement there is undoubtedly “leakage” via the officials. However, the real, large scale, theft is driven by politicians. Instead of exercising oversight, they bend the procurement and contracting processes to their ends. The utter devastation and failure of our municipalities across the country is evidence of the impact of this looting, along with the lost opportunities for real growth and development. I might be called a hopeless optimist, but I remain convinced that the development state can work and it can make a lasting impact in the just transition too. Ethical, courageous, disciplined, and consistent (political) leadership is required to enable it. That, as we have seen, in where the real challenge lies.

I return to the ghost of apartheid—De Klerk’s apartheid normativity in the post-apartheid—and to the desperation of today’s politically enfranchised but spatially excluded. It bears worth reminding our political leaders that there can be no justice without spatial justice. It bears worth reminding of the findings of the Harvard Growth Lab report, ‘Growth Through Inclusion in South Africa’, which notes that in the absence of ‘direct responses to spatial exclusion via urban and housing policies’ (Hausmann et al. 2023, 02), all other government efforts to improve welfare will be marginalised.

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'My Focus is on Tackling Corruption Decisively, Investigating High Profile Cases Thoroughly, and Ensuring that Justice is Served': Interview plus commentary¹

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1. Introduction

The Special Investigating Unit (SIU) is 'reputed to be one of the more effective anti-corruption agencies in South Africa – an 'island of integrity' in the context of systemic corruption' (Bruce, Ashton and Frank 2025, 04). Islands of integrity supposedly 'reduce corruption despite being surrounded by endemic corruption' (Zúñiga 2018).

Established in 1997, by President Nelson Mandela, under the SIU and the Special Tribunals Act, Act No. 74 of 1996 (SIU Act), the SIU's primary mandate

...is to investigate serious allegations of corruption, malpractice and maladministration in the administration of State institutions, State assets and public money as well as any conduct which may seriously harm the interests of the public, and to recover any financial losses suffered by State institutions through civil litigation (SIU 2026).

A Senior Official at the SIU—whose identity is withheld—reminds that the 'SIU was initially constituted as a Commission that moved to be permanent', however, with its 'own salary scales and grading systems because we are not part of the public service'. So, when moving from Commission to 'permanent',

...some of the acts and or legislation was never changed throughout. So, we continue with the legacy of having it being started as a Commission.

2. Reasons for the success of the SIU

There are many reasons accounting for the success of the SIU—documented in the literature by Bruce et al. (2025)—and confirmed by the Senior Official. SIU's success is attributed to:

- Building our own timber:

Most of our employees stay and develop with us because we invest in them. One of our key approaches is building our own timber. We enrol new recruits into training programmes lasting six months and after this training, we assign them to experienced investigators for mentorship, which enables them to develop and progress. Consequently, our staff often remain with us longer than those we hire who already possess extensive knowledge...We've taken individuals from the streets, giving them opportunities they never imagined—many had no prior experience in investigations. Yet, because they were willing to learn, they succeeded. In contrast, hiring more experienced professionals at higher levels often results in higher turnover, as they tend to chase after money rather than commit long-term.

- Record of success:

Our success is rooted in our ability to conduct investigations within a defined timeframe and to deliver outcomes. People are drawn to our success, our model and the way we operate. It's no longer solely about the money. In fact, our salary structures have remained consistent over the years. Many individuals have chosen to join us and even forego higher salaries, because they genuinely want to be part of the SIU. People recognise the SIU as a thriving organisation doing meaningful work. That's when we saw more individuals saying: "This is where I want to be".

¹ The commentary in this paper is solely those of the authors (Khan and Kolevsohn) and not that of the SIU official nor the SIU.

- The employee value proposition:

In terms of our employee value proposition, we prioritise taking care of all our members. We ensure that our systems and processes are effective, transparent and well-defined. This way anyone who joins knows what is expected of them, and we foster a supportive environment that encourages growth and excellence.

- Thinking out of the box:

We always remind them to think out of the box. We empower our members to innovate to conduct investigations we hired them to do and perform their duties effectively. We provide them with the most necessary tools and make sure that they are able to deliver.

- Financial autonomy and contractual flexibility

We are not part of government but get 40 per cent of our budget from government and the rest through recovery projects through project financing. The current design gives us significant leverage. This model allows us to contract and expand flexibly, unlike if you were given 100 staff, maybe for example, 10 000, and told this is your budget and you are stuck with it. And you appoint people, and do not even have a room to manoeuvre. Currently, we get the budget and as a result, when we get more work, we are able to invoice and able to get to appoint more people, because if we have got more work, we are able to get in people and those people, we align them to our needs, and we align them with the period of the work that we want them to do. If we want them for six months, then we are able to if the project is for six months. We are able to appoint them for six months, then after six months we let them go. During the six months, they are able to claim the costs from the Department. So, for me, I think the model works. But the only challenge is where the person that you are investigating is the one who is supposed to pay you.

- Whole-of-Society Approach:

Most individuals involved in corruption are known to us—they are not hidden. We have established forums that bring together civil society, law enforcement, labour and other stakeholders to collaborate on combatting corruption. By fostering closer collaboration and engagement, we increase our chances of solving cases and preventing corruption.

The interviewee repeatedly returned to the importance of credibility, institutional trust and consistency in anti-corruption work. For the official, investigations alone are not sufficient—institutions must be perceived as ethical, professional and operationally independent. Public confidence in anti-corruption institutions depends not only on arrests or proclamations, but on whether ordinary citizens believe cases are pursued consistently and without fear or favour.

The interviewee acknowledges the practical realities confronting investigators operating in politically contested environments. High-profile investigations often generate institutional resistance, political pressure, reputational attacks and attempts to undermine investigators themselves. However, the interviewee insists, anti-corruption institutions cannot become paralysed by these pressures:

My focus is on tackling corruption decisively, investigating high-profile cases thoroughly, and ensuring that justice is served.

This emphasis on institutional credibility and operational resilience partly explains why the SIU continues to be regarded by many observers as one of the few anti-corruption institutions in South Africa that has retained meaningful public trust, despite broader governance deterioration.

The interviewee's reflections on institutional culture, operational flexibility and organisational independence reopen longstanding debates—dating back to 1999—about whether South Africa should consolidate anti-corruption efforts within a single agency or strengthen a network of partially independent institutions with overlapping mandates (discussed below).

3. Anti-corruption agency (ACA)

The SIU, it is argued, 'fills a strategic gap in South Africa's anti-corruption institutional architecture' (Ashton 2025). The United Nations Convention against Corruption (2003) provides that South Africa should have a dedicated anti-corruption prevention agency. The SIU's reputation for effectiveness could explain why the President's National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council (NACAC) recommended the SIU to become South Africa's new dedicated anti-corruption agency (ACA). At the National Anti-Corruption Dialogue in December 2024, NACAC proposed a new independent Chapter 9 ACA with preventative and investigative powers. The functions of the SIU are to be absorbed into the Office of Public Integrity (OPI), 'enabling the new agency to start immediately' (Ashton 2025).

The interviewee welcomed the establishment of the OPI, which '*is still in the conceptual stage*'.

We believe that once implementation begins, we will be able to develop and clarify its functions further. As a Chapter 9 institution, the OPI must operate independently, similar to the Public Protector. This means it should conduct its investigations autonomously and issue reports without political interference. The reports should be submitted directly to the public and relevant authorities, not through any political channels. In terms of the proposal, it appears to suggest a dual model: the OPI could still apply for a Proclamation through the President, who retains the authority to issue it, or the head of the OPI could have the power to declare a Proclamation and operate independently. This flexibility aims to balance the need for independence with the existing legal framework, ensuring the OPI can function effectively and without undue influence.

Debates about whether South Africa should have a single ACA go back to 1999 (Camerer 1999). In 2011, the National Planning Commission concluded that establishing a single central ACA was not a ‘viable option’ given South Africa’s institutional context. Instead, it warned that political interference, executive overreach, fragmented mandates and weak coordination between investigative and prosecutorial agencies undermined the country’s ability to combat corruption effectively (National Planning Commission 2012, 431–434). As opposed to a single ACA, the National Planning Commission favoured building ‘systemic resilience against interference’ through a multiplicity of agencies operating within a framework of institutional checks and balances (National Planning Commission 2012, 448). In 2024, the Institute for Security Studies ‘found no evidence globally that a single agency model outperforms a multi-agency approach’ (Ashton 2024).

According to Doig and Norris (2012), an ACA signals that government takes anti-corruption efforts seriously. The ACA can be insulated against undue influences via a high(er) degree of specialisation, autonomy from other agencies and departments to undertake investigation with skilled expertise. A completely new institution will enjoy a “fresh start”, free from corruption and other problems that may be present in existing institutions. In addition, it has greater public credibility, and it can be extended enhanced security protection. With greater political, legal and public accountability, there is likely to be improved clarity in the assessment of its progress, successes and failures. Task-specific resources will be used, and officials will not be subject to the competing priorities of general law enforcement, audit and similar agencies. Finally, it incorporates an additional safeguard against corruption in that it will be in a position to monitor the conventional law enforcement agencies.

4. No standardised ACA model

There is ‘no standardised model of what an ACA should look like’ (De Sousa 2010, 12).

Few have been created from scratch with a statutory act. Many are formed from ombudsman offices, special units in the police forces or the prosecution offices...In practice, however, many of these bodies were conceived without a strategy or policy to justify their existence. Format preceded function instead of the other way around (De Sousa 2010, 12–13).

Moreover, there is little ‘acknowledgement of the challenges of their long-term development or of the frequent failure of ACAs elsewhere’ (Johnston 2025, 556) in tackling crime effectively, investigating high-profile cases thoroughly and ensuring that justice is served. Police corruption, money laundering and financial crime today pose significant challenges to ACAs that focus exclusively on public sector corruption (Quah 2024).

5. Limited effectiveness of ACAs

The preponderance of literature on an international scale point to the ‘limited effectiveness’ of ACAs in marked contrast to their adoption (De Vrieze and Glušac 2025, 32). Specialised agencies ‘can have some impact but are not the solution to corruption within a country’ (Fukuyama and Recanatini 2018, 58).

Successful ACAs require solid political backing at all levels, major resources, genuine independence, the power to prosecute criminal cases (or at least the expectation that prosecutors will routinely move ahead with cases assembled by the ACA), and deep-rooted social credibility. Should events and evidence demand it, an ACA must be able to investigate and prosecute the same political figures who brought it into being and resist elite demands that it pursues regime critics. These are difficult standards to meet, particularly where power is personalized, resources are scarce, non-corrupt paths of advancement are few, and institutions are weak (which is to say, in most societies where corruption is a pressing concern). Even ACAs that are not manipulated from above routinely engage in “reform theatre” rather than taking meaningful action.

6. Washing away islands of integrity

Many ACAs have a ‘difficult life and are vulnerable to repeated attacks from politicians seeking to assert their influence’ (Quah 2024, 5). South Africa has a history of creating islands of integrity that were ‘washed away’ (Passas 2010, 02), with little reference to the ‘assessment of concrete performance indicators’ (De Sousa 2010, 20). South Africa’s Directorate of Special Operations (Scorpions) was dissolved through legislation—National Prosecuting Authority Amendment Act (Act 56 of 2008) and South African Police Service Amendment Act (Act 57 of 2008)—with disbandment taking effect in early 2009. Before its closure, the Scorpions ‘built an international reputation as a trailblazing criminal investigations and prosecutions unit that effectively used the latest techniques to tackle the most complex crimes’ (National Prosecuting Authority 2022 as cited in Dolley 2025).

The Scorpions were controversial among politicians and government officials. Echoing the African National Congress’s (ANC) complaints about the tactics of the Scorpions, the South African Communist Party (2007) expressed its ‘principled’ concern about the ‘conduct of the Scorpions’ generally and their ‘Hollywood style of operation’. The political controversy eventually led to the ANC’s 2007 Polokwane Conference decision to disband the Scorpions related to leading investigations against high-profile ANC figures like former Deputy President Jacob Zuma, and the prosecution of Jackie Selebi (former National Commissioner of the South African Police Service) and Tony Yengeni (former ANC Member of Parliament). At the Conference, the ANC Secretary General stated: ‘We created a monster, and we must undo it’ (cited in LegalBrief Forensic 2026). In April 2005, President Mbeki appointed Judge Sisi Khampepe to head a commission of inquiry to review the mandate and location of the Scorpions. The Commission’s report was released in May 2008.

While the Khampepe Commission was hearing evidence on the future of the Scorpions, prominent members across the ANC and government were calling for the Scorpions to be absorbed into the police with whom they shared a tense relationship (Mashele 2006). In his essay “Scorpions’ Birth Was Poisoned,” Steinberg (2007) argues that although conceived as an elite anti-corruption and organised crime agency, it was established in an intensely contested political environment, was without sustained political protection, and struggled to secure the institutional space necessary to independently investigate powerful interests. Its demise reflected institutional vulnerabilities present from its inception, more than political hostility at the point of disbandment. These structural weaknesses left the organisation vulnerable to later political intervention, despite its operational successes.

Addressing Members of Parliament recently, Firoz Cachalia, the now Acting Minister of Police, dubbed the 2009 disbandment of the Scorpions a ‘mistake’, because ‘it had a lot of success’ and because it exposed South Africa to criminality: ‘[W]e can see that clearly... given where we are now and the problems, we’re facing now’ (cited in Dolley 2025). Not unlike the disbandment of the Scorpions in 2009, the Acting Minister condemned the December 2024 disbandment of KwaZulu-Natal’s highly effective Political Killings Task Team (PKTT) by the Minister of Police, Senzo Mchunu—the now ‘semi-retired Minister of Police, facing charges of complicity in a nationwide criminal death squad’ (Duigan 2026, 69)—as not being done ‘the right way’ and was ‘unwise’ (cited in Dolley 2025). Parliament’s Ad Hoc Committee’s draft report (2026) investigated Mchunu’s conduct in the PKTT’s disbandment:

...concluded that ‘the evidentiary record discloses a serious and multilayered institutional crisis’ and that the directive disbanding the PKTT was issued without consultation with the National Commissioner, the President, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), the State Security Agency (SSA) or the Civilian Secretariat (cited in Pillay 2026).

7. Conclusion

The disbandment of the Scorpions (2009) and the PKTT (2024)—the former deemed a “mistake” and latter “unwise” by Acting Minister of Police, Firoz Cachalia—raises serious questions about the operation and viability of ACAs in highly corrupt environments with strong incentives to stall, delay and upend anti-corruption reform, because resources are scarce and non-corrupt paths of advancement are few. Police corruption—“blue capture”—money laundering and financial crime pose significant challenges to ACAs. The future ACA architecture must ensure that function precedes institutional format, however, with no standardised models. The challenge is, therefore, not simply creating new agencies—a case of format potentially preceding function in current debates—but ensuring that existing islands of integrity are protected, not compromised by the political and institutional tides they were and are designed to withstand.

Regardless of where political or institutional pressure originates, ACAs must retain operational autonomy, organisational flexibility, financial independence and public legitimacy necessary to investigate corruption consistently and with material consequence. Accountability gains and losses in public legitimacy depend on investigation, exposure, visible consequences, institutional repair and democratic renewal. These are not impossible standards as there is ample convincing precedent in South Africa, before islands of integrity were washed away, and is vindicated by the present effectiveness and success of the SIU.

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A Practitioner's Encounter of Corruption: A Passage from Apartheid to Post-Apartheid Corruption

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1. Introduction

Through my journey as a child in a family of fruit and vegetable traders during apartheid, to a post-apartheid senior public official, I have come to appreciate that corruption does not define the state. It is the predictable consequence of insulated administrative, coercive and political power, particularly when inequality is normalised. Corruption emerges when these powers become concentrated, unaccountable and permanent.

2. Apartheid's exploitation and survival by fresh produce, samoosas and proxy ownership

My formative years were spent in a fruit-and-vegetable family business in an area that was eventually zoned 'white' under the Group Areas Act (1950).¹ Apartheid was at its most powerful. Pass law inspectors, group areas inspectors and officials testing the accuracy of weighing scales were regular features of my childhood.

The fear on the faces of grown men hiding in dark rooms to avoid arrest by pass law² enforcement inspectors is seared into my memory. These inspectors arrived and left with no evidence of "illegal" labour, but satisfied with loads of free fresh produce. Permits to operate a business in a white area were refused if the municipal officials were denied some *pasella*.³ As a result of the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), local parks were separated. Park-keepers turned a blind eye to our presence for an apple and an orange. In 1980, I saw my angst-ridden father giving Johannes "*Spyker*" (nail in Afrikaans) van Wyk, a leading member of the feared Security Branch,⁴ fruit to (unsuccessfully) protect my brother from his interrogation.

After decades working as a hawker, my grandfather was able to afford a bank loan to buy property in the early 1940s to open a fruit and vegetable shop. When his family built apartments on part of the property, they could not live in them because only white people could be tenants. When it was possible, they transferred the property to a closed corporation in which a white person whom they trusted held the majority shares. A soured relationship meant that he could easily claim the property as his own. A family managed to stay in District Six after the forced removals through regular supplies of samoosas to senior officials of the Cape Town municipality.

These experiences are not unique and were pervasive throughout South Africa at the time. It was a mutually beneficial ecosystem. Traders needed to continue trading in areas they were in before 1950, and the "poor whites"⁵ were entirely dependent on the financial support provided by them. Relationships were forged and favours extracted from 1948 well into the 1980s.

3. Transitioning from apartheid to the post-apartheid: Exclusion of progressive planners and community alienation

Joining the Western Cape Regional Service Council as a Town and Regional Planner in 1990 introduced me to the corruption ecosystem of the nexus between property developers and their influence over officials and politicians.

South Africa embraced "neoliberalism". Privatisation and corporatisation of state-owned enterprises began. For local governments, this meant employing fewer people and ballooning contracts with consultants. Some officials resigned and established consulting companies or joined long-established ones. These officials-turned-consultants leveraged relationships with remaining officials to secure contracts. Progressive planners in the system were hated and confined to insignificant work.

¹ According to this Act, urban areas were to be divided into racially segregated zones where members of one specific race alone could live and work. Group areas were created for the exclusive ownership and occupation of a designated racial group. It was a criminal offence for a member of one racial group to reside on or own land in an area set aside by proclamation for another race.

² The Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act (1952) was a cornerstone of apartheid, replacing various regional permits with a single, mandatory and more rigid "reference book" (or *dompas*) for all Black South Africans over 16 years.

³ An old Cape Town slang word meaning a freebie

⁴ Operating with cold-blooded efficiency, the Security Branch had wide powers to track down, detain and torture suspected activists and opponents of apartheid.

⁵ The rise of the Nationalist Party and its racial laws can be traced back to the social and economic upliftment of poor white Afrikaners.



The spatial consequences of the relationship between officials and developers manifested in numerous coastal towns. They share common traits of similarly designed face-brick houses. Senior officials exercised extensive decision-making power to adjudicate urban development applications. Approvals by the Administrator of Cape Province were based on the advice of the officials. In return, officials received plots, drew up the building plans and approved them.

Under apartheid, local government administration for racially designated Indian and Coloured areas was the responsibility of collaborators called management committees. They were focused on feathering their own nests and I once had to write a report recommending that a collaborator be granted public land for a service station under the guise of his family's dispossession under the Group Areas Act. At some point, I started engaging informally with the local civic organisation in Grassy Park on planning-related matters since I believed that development decisions could no longer be exclusively decided by these management committees. Despite that collaborator's opposition to this being formalised, he was later welcomed into the ANC, the liberation movement. I had to work with them; however, I chose to also start engaging with democratic organisations. In Grassy Park, I advised starting consultations with LOGRA, the local civic, on planning-related matters. All development recommendations could no longer be solely and exclusively decided by apartheid's management committee. I was directed to draft a report—which I reluctantly wrote—recommending that my senior be granted a service station site because his family was dispossessed by the Group Areas Act. Members of the committee were mainly interested in feathering their own nests; that is, capturing public property was the primary objective.

A report that I was permitted to omit my name from as the author was the rezoning of the Steenberg Golf Estate from a grape farm. The application, I argued, should be refused on that basis and based on limits placed on urban development. These arguments did not convince my seniors. The result, successful land claimants have had to settle for property elsewhere of measurably low(er) value.

4. Consulting to the post-apartheid state: Appointments and connections

The democratic state absorbed and amalgamated apartheid-era bureaucracies. Unsurprisingly, corruption became hardwired into the DNA of new administrations. Some post-apartheid appointees quickly learned the opportunities in enculturation. As the embodiment of the developmental state, all three spheres of government were allocated large sums of money for spatial planning. With newly established transparency, more creative ways had to be mined to extract personal benefits.

Around 2022, the consulting firm I belonged to (MCA) was awarded a tender to undertake municipal planning and local economic development assessments in the North-West Province of South Africa. The official whom the firm was instructed to appoint was unable to draft a simple report.

To this day, irregular appointments remain pervasive, undermining social justice that democratised administrations are compelled to deliver in spatial and development plans. Consequently, public resources are squandered, and communities become victims of haphazard and chaotic spatial decisions of municipalities. This is a national problem and when combined with weak land use control, results in formal and informal settlements found on land prone to environmental disasters and residents fall prey to extra-judicial and violent rent-seekers.

The Southern Cape often goes through cycles of drought and floods, hence, water management factors into development planning. Dairy farmers in that region have experienced financial strain due to the specific functioning of the value chain. The large retail chains determine prices paid to farmers, the price takers. The combination of water stress and the rapid rate at which farmers were selling their properties to developers of residential estates was a concern for the Western Cape Provincial Government. Fertile land was being sold to big property developers for the construction of upmarket residential units with high water usage. These residential developments were far outside urban boundaries, contrary to national and provincial policies. Customarily, many property developers partnered with politically connected people as shareholders to manage relationships with communities and politicians. In 2005, MCA was awarded the tender to develop guidelines for the provincial government and local municipalities to consider when assessing rezoning applications for golf and polo estates. By 2006, pursuant to explicit inter-governmental objectives of spatial transformation, MCA produced guidelines detailing location, public transport for workers, environmental and agricultural assessments and water use. The developers did not like this and a government minister approached me to tone down the guidelines. In the end, the reduced market demand, rather than policies or guidelines, limited the proliferation.

5. Working in the post-apartheid state: Capture, developers, the mafia and death threats

In September 2010, I became the Chief Operations Officer in the national Department of Public Works. The new Minister suspended the director-general in early December, and a week later, the acting director-general suspended me. In my short employment stint at the Department, I learnt of the endemic corruption in the government's leasing of property. The Department is responsible for providing office accommodation to all government departments and receives requests based on their requirements. The Department should follow supply chain management processes, which also entertained unsolicited bids, but under exceptional circumstances. Person A has a property and approaches the Department to lease it. Someone in the Department contacts Person B—not in the Department—who approaches Person A, saying: 'I believe you have a property to let, I will buy it from you'. Person B does not have the funds to purchase the property yet submits an offer well beyond its market value. On the back of this deal, Person B approaches his contact in the Department, who starts the formal process of approval. The rental per square metre is overblown, that is, higher than the quantum of the inflated sale agreement and the market value. Upon getting approval, Person B approaches a bank to fund the purchase based on the value of the lease. The seller and enabling officials are paid, while the rest is pocketed with minimal renovations. The property is hardly maintained during the lease period, which explains why government buildings in Pretoria are in a parlous condition, and why some government Departments have sought alternative means to find suitable offices. When I was acting director-general, the owner of one of the properties under consideration insisted that I sign the lease. I refused, and he seethed with rage. Sixteen years later, the current Minister of Public Works still battles this endemic corruption.

As Director of Economic Development and Planning at Drakenstein Municipality (Western Cape), two cases stand out. The first relates to a charity operating in Lesotho that was hosting a fundraising event at a high-end private estate. A well-known South African was the marketing director who approached the municipality for sponsorship. We had not budgeted for this, and neither was it a priority in a municipality that provides monthly assistance to registered indigent households. I was not keen to sponsor this event, however, was persuaded to legally redirect funds from economic development and tourism for the sponsorship. When I met the representative to discuss the terms of the financial assistance in my office, he said: '[Name of a politician withheld] owes me. I raise a lot of money for the Democratic Alliance'.

The second experience relates to a rezoning application of a wine estate owned by the director of a well-known affordable housing company. The development proposal contravened national, provincial and the municipality's policies related to the protection of agricultural land, and the traffic engineers also raised concerns about access. I advised my team to find a compromise to take to the Mayoral Committee (Mayco). The director's consultants were satisfied with the compromise; however, I was blindsided at the Mayco, which vetoed it. During a comfort break, I asked a member of Mayco: 'Councillor, what is going on? Does this developer fund your party?' Later, during a closed session, the Mayco member asked the question, and according to him, all "hell broke loose". In the end, the developer triumphed. Policy be damned!

When I was Chief Executive Officer, from 2018–2022, at the Mandela Bay Development Agency (MBDA) in the Eastern Cape Province, we worked in New Brighton township. Funding was allocated for infrastructure upgrades. Extortionists, commonly termed the "construction mafia", demanded payments received by contractors for work completed. The community and the collective of councillors were unable to stop the extortionists who threatened to derail legitimately and legally approved infrastructure projects. When our project manager, who hails from New Brighton, was threatened by someone who said, 'We know where your mother lives', I stepped in and called the extortionists to our offices to explain that if they were to continue in this way, the projects would be cancelled and funds allocated to another township. They were enraged. Protecting my staff, ensuring that public resources were safeguarded, and delivering the project incurred hefty increased mental and personal costs to us as individuals. It need not be this way! The MBDA also worked in Helenvale, a Coloured township besieged by gangsterism. Using funding from the German Development Bank, we built a sports stadium, sidewalks and public lighting on time and within budget, employing youth at risk and people who had spent time in jail on the construction sites. The agency trained people in construction techniques, paid fair wages, and worked closely with the local community representatives.

In 2024, I was Governance and Support Officer at the City of Tshwane (Gauteng Province) responsible for economic development and planning, fleet management, legal and administration. An elderly official in the building plans section approached me. He had lodged a complaint about corrupt practices against a young colleague. After an initial enquiry, the offending official unsuccessfully approached the complainant, requesting the withdrawal of the complaint. Minutes after the refusal, the complainant received WhatsApp messages containing firearms, the official's home address and a threat of assassination. Fearing repercussions, the official refused to lodge a complaint with the police. Corruption is so endemic in the building plans and land use application unit that some officials were reported to carry

approval stamps and certificates of compliance in their private vehicles. Once a plan is registered on the system, these officials effectively bypass it, issuing their own approvals for fees for as low as ZAR5 000 to unknown numbers for larger-scale projects. In Tshwane, there are buildings with legal authorisations that do not comply with the zoning of the property or the building regulations, creating structural safety concerns for the occupants, liability considerations and revenue loss for the municipality.

6. Concluding thoughts: Today's legal corruption and the corruption of wealth

My experience with the democratic state since 1994 reveals that degraded service delivery and the psychological impacts on ethical officials are incalculable. Examples provided demonstrate that corruption is not merely one of ethics. My family was well respected as trusted and ethical people, yet they believed they had little choice but to provide *pasella* for economic survival during apartheid. It is not different from contemporary informal traders seeking permits to trade in towns and cities, or desperate people seeking to establish informal dwellings on public land. Compliance and anti-corruption initiatives fail because they focus on compliance regulations, forensic audits, and tighter procurement controls. This arsenal and regime are simply not working to stem the tide of corruption, as they are either ignored or loopholes are mined for legal corruption through opaque administrative actions and self-serving bureaucracies enabled by short-term enrichment, especially in the property sector. Perhaps the remedy for this type of corruption lies outside the state. When citizens are absent from oversight, when politicians are insulated from social sanction, and when corruption is so endemic and entrenched, there is no place or space for symbolic beacons or positive outliers. Public policy and development planning will continue to be subverted and corrupted at the behest, instruction and financing of those with influence.

From Proposal to Practice: The Evolution of the International Anti-Corruption Court Movement

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Abstract

This practitioner essay examines the evolution of the movement to establish an International Anti-Corruption Court (IACC) as a response to persistent gaps in the global enforcement of grand corruption. While the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) provides comprehensive normative standards, enforcement remains constrained where political elites control domestic investigative and prosecutorial institutions. Drawing on an interview with Justice Richard Goldstone, Chair Emeritus of the IACC Treaty Committee, together with analysis of the evolving treaty development process, the paper traces how the proposal has matured through engagement with governments, legal experts and civil society. It examines how critiques concerning sovereignty, political legitimacy, complementarity, selective international justice and enforcement have informed successive iterations of the proposed court. Attention is given to the court's expanding focus on asset recovery, professional enablers and African participation in treaty development as mechanisms to strengthen legitimacy and effectiveness. The current study argues that the significance of the IACC lies not only in its proposed jurisdiction, but also in its evolution through inclusive consultation and institutional learning. It concludes that sustainable international accountability depends upon credible institutions, political legitimacy and broad civil society ownership.

Keywords: international anti-corruption court, grand corruption, international justice, asset recovery, civil society, institutional legitimacy, treaty development, transnational corruption

1. Introduction

Grand corruption remains one of the most significant threats to democratic governance, sustainable development and public trust. While the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) established a comprehensive international framework for preventing and criminalising corruption, its implementation ultimately depends on domestic investigative, prosecutorial and judicial institutions. Where these institutions are captured by political elites or lack the independence and capacity to pursue high-level corruption, accountability frequently fails, allowing kleptocratic networks to operate with impunity (Stephenson and Schütte 2019; United Nations 2004; Wolf 2018).

Recognising this enforcement gap, an international coalition of jurists, prosecutors and civil society organisations proposed an International Anti-Corruption Court (IACC) to exercise jurisdiction only where national authorities are unwilling or genuinely unable to investigate and prosecute grand corruption. Since its initial conception, however, the proposal has undergone substantial refinement through consultation with governments, legal experts and civil society. Concerns regarding sovereignty, complementarity, political legitimacy, selective international justice, institutional feasibility and African ownership have all shaped successive iterations of the proposed treaty (Lamb 2025; Stephenson and Schütte 2019).

This practitioner essay examines the evolution of the IACC movement as an example of institutional learning in international justice. Drawing on an interview with Justice Richard Goldstone, Chair Emeritus of the IACC Treaty Committee, alongside the evolving treaty process, the study explores how the proposal has responded to criticism, while seeking to strengthen international accountability for grand corruption and the transnational networks that enable it.

2. From impunity to institutional innovation

The proposal for an IACC did not emerge as a response to a failure of international law, but rather to a persistent gap between international norms and domestic enforcement. The UNCAC established international standards for preventing, criminalising and recovering the proceeds of corruption. However, while UNCAC created a comprehensive legal framework, it deliberately left the investigation and prosecution of corruption to national authorities (United Nations 2004). In jurisdictions where prosecutorial institutions are independent and adequately resourced, this model has proven effective. However, in countries where political elites exercise control over law enforcement, grand corruption frequently remains beyond the reach of domestic justice (Wolf 2018).

This accountability gap has become increasingly significant as corruption has evolved into a transnational enterprise. Illicit financial flows are facilitated through complex international networks involving shell companies, financial institutions, legal advisers, accountants, property markets and offshore financial centres. While political leaders may orchestrate the theft of public resources, the concealment, movement and laundering of illicit wealth often depend upon professional intermediaries operating across multiple jurisdictions (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2014).

It was within this context that former United States District Judge Mark L. Wolf proposed the establishment of an IACC as a court of last resort, exercising jurisdiction only where states are unwilling or genuinely unable to prosecute grand corruption (Wolf 2018). The proposal drew upon the principle of complementarity that underpins the International Criminal Court (ICC), while adapting it to the distinctive challenges posed by systemic corruption. Rather than replacing domestic courts, the IACC provides an independent forum for exceptional cases where domestic institutions have been compromised.

Importantly, the proposal has not remained static. Since its initial conception, it has evolved through extensive consultation with governments, international legal experts, prosecutors, academics and civil society organisations. Successive iterations of the draft treaty have responded to concerns regarding sovereignty, institutional legitimacy, political feasibility and the practical challenges of enforcement. According to Justice Goldstone, during the treaty development process, durable international institutions are built not through legal innovation alone, but through broad consultation, institutional independence and sustained public confidence (Goldstone interview 2025). Therefore, the evolution of the IACC proposal represents not simply the design of a new international institution, but an ongoing process of institutional learning informed by both the successes and limitations of earlier international justice initiatives.

3. Learning from international justice

The IACC has been shaped by more than two decades of international criminal justice. This process of institutional learning has influenced both the Court's legal architecture and the broader strategy through which the proposal has been developed.

As former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and later as a Justice of South Africa's Constitutional Court, Justice Goldstone witnessed both the transformative potential and practical limitations of international criminal justice. Reflecting on these experiences, Justice Goldstone emphasised that effective international institutions derive their legitimacy not simply from legal authority, but from judicial independence, procedural fairness, political credibility and public confidence (Goldstone interview 2025). These principles have informed successive iterations of the proposed IACC treaty.

One of the most persistent criticisms of the ICC concerned perceptions of selective justice. During its early years, several of the ICC investigations involved African countries, leading many political leaders and commentators to argue that international criminal justice disproportionately targeted the Global South, while avoiding politically sensitive cases involving more powerful states (Murungu 2011; Schabas 2020). Although several of these investigations were initiated through self-referrals by African governments or referrals by the United Nations Security Council, the perception of unequal justice nevertheless weakened confidence in the institution across much of the continent. Legitimacy depends on the even-handed application of legal standards.

Subsequent developments have demonstrated a broader geographical engagement by the ICC. Investigations concerning Georgia, Ukraine, the Philippines and the Palestinian territories have illustrated an increasing willingness to apply international criminal law beyond its earlier geographic focus (Schabas 2020). While these developments reinforce an important lesson for future international institutions, credibility depends upon demonstrating that legal standards apply consistently, regardless of political influence or geographic location.

These experiences have directly influenced the evolution of the IACC proposal. Rather than relying on universal jurisdiction or displacing domestic legal systems, the proposed court is founded on the principle of complementarity, exercising jurisdiction only where states are demonstrably unwilling or are genuinely unable to investigate and prosecute grand corruption (Wolf 2018). This approach preserves state sovereignty, while recognising that corruption frequently flourishes where domestic institutions have been deliberately weakened or captured by political elites. The proposal, therefore, reinforces rather than replaces national accountability mechanisms.

The treaty's emphasis on institutional legitimacy and political ownership has been a defining feature of the initiative from its inception rather than a subsequent response to external criticism. Although some commentators questioned whether the proposal had sufficiently engaged governments and civil society in regions most affected by grand corruption (Stephenson and Schütte 2019), the initiative has, from its earliest stages, been developed through partnerships with legal practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders from the Global South. Early political support from Colombia, together with sustained engagement across Africa, Latin America and other regions, reflected a deliberate commitment to broad international ownership rather than externally driven institutional design. As the treaty has evolved, this consultative approach has expanded further through structured engagement with governments, regional organisations, academics and practitioners, reaffirming the principle that the Court's legitimacy depends upon inclusive participation in its development and governance. Justice Goldstone has similarly emphasised that durable international institutions derive their authority from broad participation, judicial independence and public confidence rather than perceptions of external imposition (Goldstone interview 2025).

Perhaps the most significant lesson concerns the changing nature of corruption itself. Unlike genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity, grand corruption is rarely confined within national borders. Stolen public resources are commonly transferred through international financial systems, concealed through complex corporate structures and protected by professional intermediaries operating across multiple jurisdictions. Effective accountability, therefore, requires institutional mechanisms capable of addressing both the public officials who orchestrate corruption and the transnational networks that facilitate it. This recognition has increasingly shaped the treaty's development and marks one of the most significant departures from earlier models of international criminal justice. Rather than simply adapting existing institutions, the IACC seeks to respond to the distinctive legal, financial and institutional realities of transnational kleptocracy.

4. Building the IACC through consultation

Unlike many international legal initiatives that emerge through intergovernmental negotiation alone, the proposed IACC has evolved through an iterative process of consultation involving judges, prosecutors, academics, governments and civil society organisations. Since the proposal was first advanced by Judge Wolf, the emphasis has shifted from advocating for a new institution to carefully considering what kind of institution would be capable of addressing grand corruption, while avoiding the shortcomings associated with earlier international courts (Stephenson and Schütte 2019; Wolf 2018).

The proposal would need to demonstrate legitimacy, respect for sovereignty, institutional independence and practical enforceability. Successive treaty discussions, therefore, moved beyond the question of whether an international court was desirable to how such an institution could be designed to operate effectively within the existing international legal order.

Justice Goldstone emphasised during the interview that durable international institutions are rarely created through legal drafting alone. Rather, they emerge through sustained engagement with those expected to implement, support and ultimately rely upon them. Justice Goldstone argued that the credibility of any international court depends not only on its legal powers, but also on confidence in its independence, fairness and professionalism (Goldstone interview 2025).

The treaty process deliberately broadened participation beyond traditional centres of legal expertise. Governments, judges, prosecutors, civil society organisations and regional institutions from Africa, Latin America, Europe, Asia and North America have all contributed to successive iterations of the draft treaty. Its effectiveness will depend upon broad international ownership, rather than being perceived as serving a limited group of states.

African engagement has become particularly important. Earlier debates surrounding international criminal justice demonstrated how quickly perceptions of selective justice can undermine institutional legitimacy, irrespective of legal merit. The treaty committee has, therefore, sought to ensure that African governments, practitioners and civil society organisations participate actively in shaping the proposal, rather than merely responding to a completed draft. Justice Goldstone has consistently argued that countries most affected by grand corruption should regard themselves as partners in designing the institution, not simply future users of it (Goldstone interview 2025). This approach recognises that legitimacy is strengthened through shared ownership.

Successive drafts of the treaty demonstrate how the proposal has evolved through consultation, practical experience and detailed legal refinement rather than fundamental changes in its underlying objectives. From its inception, the IACC concept combined criminal accountability with the recovery of stolen public assets, recognising that grand corruption causes profound social harm by diverting resources from essential public services, including healthcare, education and infrastructure. Throughout the treaty development process, consultations with governments, legal practitioners and civil society have focused on strengthening the institutional mechanisms through which these objectives could be achieved. This has included refining provisions on complementarity, international cooperation, institutional safeguards and asset recovery to enhance the Court's effectiveness while preserving its legitimacy. Asset recovery has therefore remained a core pillar of the proposal, with successive drafts providing greater clarity on how these powers could operate in practice rather than introducing a new area of focus.

Consultations have also strengthened the treatment of professional and corporate enablers. Participants repeatedly emphasised that grand corruption is rarely the work of individual political leaders acting alone. Complex schemes frequently rely upon financial institutions, lawyers, accountants, trust companies, corporate service providers and other professional intermediaries operating across multiple jurisdictions. As a result, the evolving treaty has increasingly recognised that meaningful accountability requires attention not only to those who abuse public office, but also to those who knowingly facilitate the concealment, movement and laundering of illicit wealth. This represents an important conceptual shift from earlier approaches that focused primarily on prosecuting politically exposed persons, while paying comparatively limited attention to the transnational financial architecture supporting corruption.

The consultative process has similarly reinforced the principle of complementarity. Rather than replacing national courts, the proposed IACC is intended to exercise jurisdiction only where domestic authorities are demonstrably unwilling or genuinely unable to investigate and prosecute grand corruption. This reflects lessons drawn from both the ICC and UNCAC, recognising that primary responsibility for combating corruption should remain with sovereign states while providing an international mechanism of last resort in exceptional circumstances (United Nations 2004; Wolf 2018).

The evolution of the proposal demonstrates that international institution-building is not a linear process, but one of continual refinement. Each round of consultation has challenged assumptions, tested institutional design and strengthened safeguards intended to improve effectiveness, legitimacy and political acceptability. Rather than viewing criticism as an obstacle, the treaty committee has treated it as an essential component of institutional learning. The proposal, therefore, shifts attention beyond corrupt political leaders to the financial centres, banks, stock exchanges, corporate service providers and professional advisers that facilitate the concealment, movement and legitimisation of illicit assets. As Justice Goldstone reflected, successful international institutions are not measured solely by the powers they possess, but by the confidence they inspire among those committed to advancing justice through the rule of law (Goldstone interview 2025).

Taken together, these developments distinguish the current proposal from earlier models of international justice. Rather than relying primarily on criminal prosecution after the fact, the evolving treaty integrates complementarity, asset recovery, international cooperation and accountability for professional enablers within a framework developed through extensive international consultation. In doing so, it seeks to respond directly to longstanding criticisms of selective justice, limited enforcement and insufficient political legitimacy.

5. Looking forward

The proposed IACC remains an ambitious institutional project whose ultimate establishment will depend upon sustained political commitment, treaty ratification and continued international cooperation. As with earlier international courts, legal design alone is insufficient. The long-term success of the proposal will depend upon whether states are willing to support an institution capable of exercising independent jurisdiction in exceptional cases, while respecting the principle that national authorities retain primary responsibility for combating corruption.

The treaty process demonstrates that international institution-building is evolutionary. Successive consultations have strengthened the proposal by responding to concerns regarding sovereignty, complementarity, legitimacy, enforcement and African participation.

Civil society has been central not only to advocating for an IACC, but also to refining its institutional design. Through consultation, technical submissions, regional convenings and public engagement, civil society organisations have helped shape successive treaty drafts and strengthen the proposal's legitimacy. As Justice Goldstone emphasised, enduring international institutions derive their authority not simply from legal mandates, but from sustained public confidence, professional independence and broad political legitimacy (Goldstone

interview 2025). The future of the IACC will, therefore, depend as much upon inclusive participation and international cooperation as upon legal innovation.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of the proposed IACC illustrates how international accountability develops through institutional learning rather than institutional design alone. Emerging from concerns that existing mechanisms were insufficient to address grand corruption where domestic institutions had been captured, the proposal has evolved through sustained engagement with governments, legal practitioners, academics and civil society organisations. Throughout, criticism has strengthened the treaty's legitimacy, institutional architecture and practical feasibility.

Justice Goldstone's reflections highlight an important lesson from international justice—credible institutions depend not only on legal authority, but also on independence, procedural fairness, transparency and public confidence. These principles have informed the treaty's evolution and remain central to its future prospects.

Whether the proposed Court ultimately enters into force remains uncertain. However, its significance extends beyond creating a single international institution. By shifting attention from individual kleptocrats to the transnational financial and professional networks that facilitate grand corruption and by grounding institutional development in broad consultation and shared ownership, the IACC movement has expanded international thinking about how accountability can be strengthened. In this respect, the IACC is significant not only as a proposed institution, but as an evolving model of international cooperation against transnational corruption.

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