



Social Norms, Mental Models and other Behavioural Drivers of Petty Corruption – *the Case of Uganda*

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This policy brief summarises the main findings and lessons learned from research on corruption, social norms and behaviours in Uganda. The empirical evidence indicates that behavioural factors associated to social practices and collective understandings play a role in shaping Ugandan citizens' attitudes towards petty corruption and in fuelling practices such as bribery and favouritism. On the basis of the research findings, policy recommendations are put forward aiming to contribute to the development of anti-corruption interventions that incorporate behavioural insights in their design and implementation.

Introduction

Petty corruption in its many forms is widespread in Uganda, resulting in the deficient delivery of essential public services. Despite a state-of-the-art legislative anti-corruption framework, Uganda today is still ranked among the most corrupt countries in Africa according to the latest sources and most recent assessments (i.a. 2015 Transparency International's CPI, World Bank's Control of Corruption indicator). Against this background, the perspective of incorporating behavioural approaches to promote anti-corruption outcomes has generated great interest.

What distinguishes a behavioural perspective from conventional anti-corruption prescriptions is the recognition that people often do not make "rational" cost-benefit decisions but are significantly influenced by social, cultural or other quasi-rational factors. These may include mental shortcuts that trigger automatic responses, for example if there is a default assumption that corruption is the norm. Behavioural factors may also involve social and cultural expectations about the acceptability of corruption; or may entail resorting to corruption as a result of social pressures or as a means to solve problems of resource scarcity and deficient access to public services.

Against this backdrop, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through its East Africa

Research Fund (EARF) commissioned the Basel Institute on Governance to conduct qualitative research exploring the utility of a behavioural approach to tackling petty corruption, which in Uganda was conducted in collaboration with Makerere University. This policy brief extracts the main research findings and policy lessons learned for the case of Uganda as one of three East African countries under investigation.¹

Main Research Findings

The research reveals strong evidence that behavioural drivers can play a significant role in fuelling and perpetuating practices associated with petty corruption in the Ugandan public sector. In particular, in the health and education sectors, the delivery of services tends to be informally regulated on the basis of practices of bribery, favouritism and gift-giving, which are embedded in and reinforced by social norms, values and collectively shared imaginaries and stereotypes (mental models).

Social networks were found to be key in the research because they represent coping mechanisms that facilitate access to services and resources in a context of resource scarcity where formal salaries are often not enough to meet basic needs. Informal social networks start with family and close friends, but can extend to all forms of

¹ The other countries were Rwanda and Tanzania. For more detail, consult the comparative and country reports as well as the other two policy briefs associated to the project, accessible on www.baselgovernance.org/publications/.

acquaintances and are often built instrumentally in order to include important individuals or ‘useful connections’ that can lend a hand in times of need.

The social networks are efficient in pooling resources because they operate on the basis of widely recognised social norms prescribing that individuals have an obligation to share resources and wealth with their group and a duty to reciprocate favours and gifts received. These social norms apply equally to public servants, which means that they are subject to pressures to use their positions to acquire resources on behalf of their family and to reciprocate gifts and favours received from friends and acquaintances. In this manner, social expectations fuel bribery and favouritism in the delivery of public services because providers need to fulfil the expectations of their networks but also because users proactively engage in bribery and gift giving as a means to co-opt service providers into their own networks. Under such circumstances, bribes are not dispensed as one-off transactions but rather as part of an on-going exchange in an economy of favours that explains why petty corruption has reached systemic levels.

The rules and expectations associated to the social networks are strongly observed because they are enforced by means of considerations of social respectability and status, which point to the social acceptability of certain corrupt practices. Thus, the individual who acquires and shares wealth with his or her group is respected and beloved regardless of the source of the riches whereas a law abiding individual who cannot afford to deliver benefits in the form and quantity expected from the network is subject to shaming, social isolation and even physical violence. However, an analysis of social network dynamics indicates that the admissibility of different behaviours is not constructed on a simple dichotomy between corrupt and non-corrupt but on the grounds of sociality and prevailing social norms that define what is socially just and reputable (see Box 1).

Box 1: What is corrupt? Social norms and social justice

- Social norms and values shape perceptions about respectability and status associated with the fulfilment of the duties of solidarity and reciprocity vis-à-vis one’s social networks.
- *Social justice* is linked to a collective ‘public’ good, defined as an in-group benefit. Only those pursuing a personal ‘private’ good, with disregard to the benefit of the group, are considered corrupt and greedy, and are therefore shamed and punished.
- Thus, bribery that aims to collect money in order to share (e.g. to be used to pay for a nephew’s school fees, for a daughter’s wedding or a relative’s funeral) is rarely condemned, and may even be praised. However, bribery with the purpose of pure self-enrichment is strongly condemned.

However, in spite of their functionality in re-distributing resources and “getting things done”, the social networks also generate significant tensions. For instance, a “successful” provider, who delivers favours at reasonable rates, will get recommended across networks. While that may constitute a significant income supplement, it also drastically increases the numbers of clients who will expect and demand privileged treatment. The research findings encountered many accounts of providers who felt exceedingly overwhelmed by heavy workloads and pressure to deliver to their networks according to their expectations.

Box 2: Behavioural drivers of petty corruption in Uganda

- The belief that *corruption is the norm* and everybody is corrupt makes decisions to bribe or seek social connections the default strategy to seek access to public services.
- *Social network dynamics* reproduce collective practices of petty corruption, such as bribery and favouritism, while fulfilling a crucial problem-solving function in a context where resources are scarce and service delivery is poor.
- Two mental models, ‘*Ugandanness*’ associated with corruption and the cultural *ideal of material wealth*, are deeply engrained in the Ugandan social structure and not only justify and rationalise corruption but critically raise the propensity of ordinary Ugandans to engage in corrupt behaviours.

Other behavioural drivers of petty corruption are rooted in *automatic decision-making* (through narrow frames) and prevailing *mental models* that justify and rationalise corrupt behaviour. In case of the former, when individuals expect corruption to be the normal state of affairs they automatically assume that every person they encounter will be corrupt. Corruption becomes a reference point that shapes expectations and decisions of service seekers in their interaction with public officials and service providers. Indeed, the research findings indicate that service users assume ‘the worst’ and often ‘come prepared’ to the service point by either collecting the money to pay a bribe or by canvassing their networks in order to find a helpful acquaintance that can assist in facilitating the service.

The research also found evidence of collectively held preconceptions – or mental models – that reinforce corrupt behaviours. In several instances research participants pointed to the association between the Ugandan national identity and corruption. For example, the phrase to “act like a Ugandan!” is frequently used to solicit a bribe. Such expressions invoke collectively held mental models about the normalcy of corruption and several research participants shared the expectation that, if given the opportunity, anyone would engage in corrupt behaviours.

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of the research findings, the following recommendations highlight the relevance of applying behavioural insights for practitioners:

Testing behavioural approaches to anti-corruption.

Developing interventions based on the evidence concerning behavioural drivers of corruption is a promising avenue for complementing conventional anti-corruption approaches. Such behavioural interventions should be conceived to target and even harness the local context and understandings - including social norms and collective beliefs - which shape incentives, attitudes and expectations regarding corruption. Designing anti-corruption behavioural interventions involves identifying shifts (or nudges) in the environment or in the information that is shared with individuals that will motivate decision-making that supports better control of corruption outcomes.

It should be underscored that, although a number of behavioural interventions have proven effective in experimental settings, the practice of incorporating behavioural considerations into policy making to improve macro level socio economic outcomes is still very much in a nascent stage. There are no blueprints to predicting what nudges people will respond to and in what way, which means that a) behavioural interventions should be rigorously piloted and assessed and b) practitioners should be ready to experiment and test different approaches to find those most effective in bringing about social change in a given context.

- **Develop and rigorously test pilot behavioural interventions that apply different nudges to elicit decision making that breaks habits of corruption.**

Understanding the role of social norms and networks, and harnessing social network properties.

Although social networks may prescribe and reproduce collective practices of petty corruption, it is likely that they can also be harnessed to promote positive anti-corruption outcomes. Innovative behavioural anti-corruption interventions would harness the power of social networks, which according to experimental evidence can help promote shifts in social norms. This can happen, for instance, by means of an induction or “peer effect” whereby an individual’s chances of adopting certain behaviours increase if the person has a friend or relative who has adopted the behaviours in question.

Network-driven interventions could harness intra-group interconnectedness by enlisting individuals who are

prominent in their communities to become anti-corruption champions tasked with diffusing key information and promoting behavioural change vis-à-vis corruption. Information could be aimed at changing conventional wisdoms of corruption and promoting a better understanding the detrimental effects of bribery and favouritism even for those who at face value appear to benefit from such practices.

- **Harnessing the transformative power of social networks can be pursued by identifying and engaging influential individuals in social networks to disseminate key messages and promote behavioural change.**

Develop interventions that catalyse the power of information.

The right use of information in corruption interventions may not only empower ordinary citizens but also be effective in addressing narrow frames and in shifting mental models. This requires challenging the conventional wisdoms that normalise corruption by, for example, disseminating stories and illustrative examples of how corruption hurts individuals and families and contradicting notions that the corrupt are successful in life as well as de-linking the stereotype of Ugandan national identity being associated to corrupt behaviours. Also, storytelling where positive role models are reinforced could shed light on the plight of positive deviants that pay a high price for not getting involved in corruption. While the research indicates that corrupt individuals are sometimes regarded as heroes because they seem to be doing well and are often recognised in many places including churches and public functions, anti-corruption champions need also be profiled and exalted to counter the wrong mental models associated with social status and success.

- **‘Edutainment’ and mass media campaigns constitute promising platforms for behavioural interventions to disseminate information that highlights the hidden costs of corruption beyond short-lived individual benefit and to debunk stereotypes that link success and respectability to wealth regardless of its source**

Tackling conflictive normative constraints and the ambivalence of the networks.

The research highlights how social pressure and expectations, entrenched in social norms and network dynamics, lead to often distressing and contradicting demands among Ugandan service providers. While, they are subjected to legal anti-corruption rules and their formal duties; they also feel obliged to give into their social networks’ expectation of favouritism and redistributing rents and resources.

The research shows informal norms are strictly enforced through social controls, including punishments such as shaming. In contrast, formal legal frameworks often lack credibility and deterrence effects or are even perceived as partial and downright unfair. Interventions could reinforce the incentives of providers and members of social networks through schemes that reward honesty and compliance – rather than simply relying on ‘negative’ incentives such as monitoring and reporting.

• Reshuffling the incentives of the service providers in a way that responds to the conflicting normative directives they are confronted with would entail a combination of making the threat and risk of detection and punishment more likely and credible. Introducing positive incentive schemes by means of which honest behaviour is tangibly rewarded and therefore made relatively more attractive to both service providers and the social networks, which gives them incentives to act with integrity and honesty.

Recognising the functionality of corruption and acknowledging people’s pragmatism.

The research findings highlight that practices of bribery and favouritism are often instrumental in solving problems of citizens who are trying to make ends meet. In a context where incomes are low and access to quality public services is problematic, the practices associated to the social networks constitute an informal safety net. This points to the fact that improving the quality and accessibility of public services is an indispensable requirement to address the practices of petty corruption that are widespread in Uganda. A reliable public safety net, whereby individuals can predictably realise their legal entitlements without recourse to informal strategies, would go a long way in ensuring the sustainability of any anti-corruption intervention aimed at addressing petty corruption.

• Behavioural interventions can effectively complement effective institutional and structural reform efforts aimed at improving the quality and accessibility of public services – thereby reducing the overall benefits and raising the costs for individuals who are used to securing services informally by resorting to petty corruption and practices such as bribery, favouritism or gift-giving.

Lessons for Practitioners

- Anti-corruption practitioners must recognise the functionality of corruption in contexts of socio-economic and institutional precariousness where individuals are driven by pragmatic incentives to ease their lives.
- Anti-corruption interventions must convey clear messages and use the right type of information that debunks conventional wisdoms that promote the acceptability of corrupt practices.
- Social networks play a pivotal role in the life of many Africans and are inherently ambivalent and two-edged: on one side, they fulfil a crucial function of pooling resources, on the other they generate tensions and pose conflicting demands to their members. Network properties should be harnessed for favourable anti-corruption outcomes.



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