

BASEL INSTITUTE ON  
GOVERNANCE

# Policy Brief

May 2017 - Number 1

## Can a Behavioural Approach Help Fight Corruption?

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**This brief summarises the lessons learned from a systematic literature review that explored the feasibility of adopting a behavioural approach to address petty corruption. The findings point to the importance of developing messages that challenge conventional wisdom about the inevitability of corruption, emphasizing the costs of corruption to the welfare of individuals as well as showcasing examples of successful detection and punishment of crimes of corruption. Accounting for prevailing social norms and beliefs is also key because otherwise anti-corruption interventions may disseminate concepts and promote actions that fail to deliver the desired messages to their intended beneficiaries.**

### Introduction

Combatting corruption in the developing world has been a formidable challenge and taken a prominent place in the agenda of the international development community for at least the last two decades. Nonetheless, the results and outcomes of conventional anti-corruption interventions continue to be modest at best.

Behavioural studies present a promising - but the most part unexplored - approach to improve development policies by incorporating a better understanding of how individuals make choices in their everyday lives. Contrary to the assumptions that underpin conventional anti-corruption strategies, what distinguishes a behavioural perspective is the recognition that people often make decisions without taking into account formal (legal, administrative) incentives, but rather rely on factors such as in-built mental shortcuts, default solutions to problems and social and cultural expectations of acceptability.

For those reasons, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through its East Africa Research Fund (EARF) has commissioned the Basel Institute on Governance to conduct research exploring the utility of a behavioural approach to bolster the fight against petty corruption.<sup>1</sup> This policy brief extracts the main findings

and lessons learned from a systematic literature review undertaken within the scope of the aforementioned research. The review, which followed the conceptual framework laid out by the 2015 World Development Report (see Box 1), is meant to contribute evidence concerning the feasibility of developing of anti-corruption interventions based on behavioural principles. The review addressed two main questions:

1. What behavioural factors having an impact on attitudes towards petty corruption have been identified in the literature?
2. What does the evidence suggest about the relative effectiveness of different types of interventions to address petty corruption?

### Main Findings

The literature review reveals strong evidence that behavioural factors can play a significant role in fuelling and perpetuating corrupt practices.

Overall, significant behavioural impacts are associated with the prevalence of mental models and narrow frames<sup>2</sup>

<http://www.earesearchfund.org/> and  
<http://www.earesearchfund.org/research-corruption-social-norms-and-behaviors-east-africa>.

<sup>2</sup> Narrow frames refer to the reference to which the automatic system of the mind refers to evaluate a situation or that which “automatically comes to mind” World Bank (2015, p. 6).

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the EARF and the research project “Corruption, Social Norms and Behaviours in East Africa” please visit

that support the idea that corruption is the normal state of affairs and that normalise expectations about deficient provision and quality of public services. Such beliefs can have a powerful influence over what societies collectively view as expected and acceptable behaviours of citizens and public officials alike, often legitimising a tacit tolerance - and even acceptance - of corrupt actions.

### Box 1: WDR Framework

- "Thinking automatically" refers to the propensity of people to make most judgements and choices automatically, rather than deliberately.
- "Thinking socially" recognises that the way in which people act and think often depends on what others around them do and think.
- "Thinking with mental models" means that individuals in any given society share common perspectives and ideas - such as stereotypes and prejudices - through which they make sense of the world around them.

Furthermore, the review confirms that interventions raising awareness about the incidence of corrupt behaviours seem to lack effectiveness in such contexts where high corruption is perceived to be the norm. Campaigns focusing on the prevalence of bribing or perceptions about corruption levels seem to not only fail to provide any new information but run the risk of reinforcing the notion that everyone is corrupt.

However, the reviewed experiences with different anti-corruption approaches do suggest that, even in highly corrupt contexts, citizens can go from passive acceptance to active engagement against corrupt practices when they are empowered with the right kind of information. In this regard, the type of information that appears to have the greatest impact is that which, not only conveys a strong message about the costs of corruption, but also throws into question the beliefs associated with corruption as the norm.

Examples of effective information include benchmark data on performance of local public services (comparing outcomes across facilities and in relation to the national average) and information on budget allocations to local schools and health facilities. Exposure to this type of data enables users to assess whether the quality of services they receive conforms to what should be expected on the basis of the performance standards prevailing in their country as well as resource availability. Furthermore, such information helps users make a stronger association between corruption, deficient public services and negative impacts on their own welfare, thus challenging prevailing mental models and providing concrete incentives to denounce and condemn corrupt behaviours.

Positive results were also recorded in interventions that stressed messages about the importance of enjoying

access to high quality public services. Such information not only reminds citizens about the value of education and health for promoting their families' wellbeing, but also underscores that corruption is not harmless.

Information is also an essential component to enhance the effectiveness of social accountability activities, especially when it promotes ownership and direct control by citizens. It is indicative that the most successful social accountability interventions in the review provided participants with information that empowered them to identify concrete instances of resource capture, mismanagement and underperformance. In fact, the evidence demonstrates that bottom-up monitoring by citizens can promote important effects on anti-corruption outcomes, which in turn suggests that promoting practical tools in conjunction with actionable information can help overcome mental models of apathy and helplessness.

The literature shows that individuals that engage in corrupt actions tend to systematically underestimate the probability of being caught, which is reinforced in contexts where there is a widely held perception of impunity for crimes of corruption. In this regard, the evidence points to the critical role of information for deterrence purposes. In several of the successful interventions reviewed, a key factor was to make the threat of detection and punishment more likely and *credible*. In fact, success was associated with actions that altered perceptions by effectively conveying messages about stronger monitoring, regardless of whether the oversight mechanisms improved or not.

### Key messages

- The literature provides compelling evidence about the role played by behavioural factors in shaping attitudes that fuel and perpetuate corruption.
- The encouraging news is that, although the identified social patterns and practices may be entrenched, they are not necessarily immutable.
- Individuals - citizens and public officials alike - while influenced in their choices by behavioural factors, are nonetheless also acutely pragmatic and will respond to stimuli they find useful, credible and beneficial.
- Anti-corruption programming should strive to incorporate the perspective of its intended beneficiaries: what are the outcomes that they value most, what are the mental models influencing their attitudes, and what are socially accepted behaviours in their respective communities.

Other review findings reveal the importance of adequately accounting for the social context when developing anti-corruption approaches. Several of the interventions assessed demonstrate that significant social cleavages generate risks of elite capture of anti-corruption social accountability interventions. Thus, when local power

asymmetries are pronounced, even well meaning anti-corruption initiatives may be taken advantage of by powerful local groups, which not only reinforces and perpetuates patterns of social domination and exclusion, but can also fuel higher levels of ‘decentralised corruption’.

The literature also illustrates how certain social norms – such as gift giving and reciprocal exchange of favours – may not align well with concepts that are fundamental to the good governance paradigm, such as a clear distinction between public and private spheres and the importance of certain rights and obligations of citizens and public officials. In this regard, the review alerts about the importance of informal social networks, which may be constituted along several different criteria such as family, clan, village, friendship, or professional association.

Such networks are typically bound together by ties of solidarity and reciprocity, and rely upon a strong sense of obligation towards the group. In contrast to abstract rights and laws that are not enforced (and often lack legitimacy), informal social networks are highly valued because they represent effective mechanisms for pooling resources, solving problems and addressing people’s needs.

Because of that functionality, the literature shows that (in Africa as well as in other regions) obligations towards the informal networks play an important role in defining social status and reputation and therefore tend to prevail when pitted against the formal rules of the state. As a consequence, the expectations from the informal groups – whereby a member holding a position of public office should do everything within his or her means to cater to the needs of the group – can fuel the incidence of corrupt actions.

There are significant implications for anti-corruption stemming from these aspects of sociality. For instance, the preponderance of informal allegiances over formal duties is most certainly linked to the prevalence and entrenched nature of the practices of clientelism and political patronage found across developing countries. Significantly, in the review, all interventions that targeted political corruption failed to substantially lower support for practices of vote buying and gift giving. This might have been because appeals to the duties of citizenship and voting in “good conscience” have limited value compared to the functionality of informal networks. Rather, from the perspective of the recipients of a patronage “gift”, what is clear is that they receive a short-term, concrete and measureable benefit whereas the

longer-term (and uncertain) benefit from rejecting such gifts is much less obvious.

### Lessons for Practitioners

- Anti-corruption interventions must convey clear messages that have an impact on the incentives of citizens (better public services) and public officials (increased risk of detection and punishment).
- Exposure to ideas that challenge conventional wisdom appears to work best.
- Evidence linking corruption to underperformance of public services may be more effective than information about incidence of corruption.
- Highlighting topics such as frequency of audits, expenditure tracking monitoring, or cases of corruption successfully prosecuted can credibly increase the perceived likelihood of detection and punishment of corrupt acts.
- Caution should be exercised in rolling out social accountability interventions in communities where social cleavages are deeply entrenched because of a high risk of capture by powerful local actors
- Targeting political corruption effectively requires a substantial effort to compellingly demonstrate the negative links of patronage and associated practices with the welfare of individuals.
- Refining an effective anti corruption message that will be meaningful and appealing to the intended beneficiaries of anti corruption campaigns may require several trials. Practitioners should be ready to experiment and test different approaches to find that to which the target population is most responsive.

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This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the Research for Evidence Division (RED) for the benefit of developing countries. However, the views expressed and information contained in it are not necessarily those of or endorsed by DFID, which can accept no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.



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