



Corruption



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We all know what corruption is. Or do we?

Corruption is a complex issue that resists simple definition. It takes many forms, is embedded in wider social, political and economic systems and is sustained through resilient informal networks. It also evolves and adapts constantly to outside pressure.

This Quick Guide explores corruption from different angles and sets out what this means for understanding and responding to it.

Defining corruption

Corruption takes many forms, and no single definition captures them all. The most widely used comes from Transparency International, which describes corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”.

This definition is useful because it captures the essence of the problem. At its core, corruption happens when something intended to serve a whole community – a public service, a resource, a contract or an opportunity – is diverted to benefit a narrower circle instead.

That circle may be a single official, a family or a much larger group. Whatever its size, the effect is the same: people who were meant to benefit are unfairly deprived of a right or entitlement through the actions – or deliberate inaction – of those entrusted with authority.

The breadth of this definition is both a strength and a limitation. Corruption covers a wide range of behaviours: bribery, procurement fraud, embezzlement, clientelism and nepotism, among many others.

That very breadth makes it hard to translate into concrete, measurable terms, and easy to turn into vague or politicised accusations.

Petty, grand and political corruption

A common way to bring more precision is to distinguish between petty, grand and political corruption, based on who is involved, how much money is at stake and the setting in which it takes place.

- **Petty corruption** occurs where public services meet the public: at the point of delivery. It typically involves front-line and mid-level officials on one side and citizens or small businesses on the other, and takes forms such as bribery, extortion and favouritism.
- **Grand corruption** centres on public procurement and the manipulation of public financial management systems to extract resources on a large scale. It involves senior politicians, high-ranking officials and top business figures, and commonly takes the form of fraud, embezzlement, kickbacks and bribery.
- **Political corruption** goes to the heart of how power is won and exercised. Public policies, elections, procedural rules and even the rule of law itself are bent to serve those in power, often with the involvement of senior political figures and powerful non-state actors. Typical forms include patronage, election rigging and state capture.

More than money

It is important to stress that corruption is not only about cash changing hands.

The “currency” of a corrupt exchange can just as easily be access to a job, the waiving of a fine or sanction, other benefits or advantages, or sexual favours.

A symptom of systemic weaknesses

Corrupt practices are embedded in complex social, political and economic systems. This means that corruption arises from the convergence of different factors and influences, and rarely has a simple explanation.

For example, corruption may be driven by need or greed. But it is enabled by weak monitoring capabilities, and further incentivised by other factors such as low trust in institutions, social norms that reinforce the acceptability of corruption, and informal agreements among state and business elites.

Corruption is therefore a consequence of weaknesses in wider systems, above all in the institutions of the state.

- When the state fails to provide essential services fairly to everyone, corruption steps in as an informal problem-solving mechanism: those who can pay get what they need.
- When the capacity to enforce the rule of law is weak, formal processes can be manipulated to favour special interests. This tilts the playing field – for example, against businesses without political connections – and fuels yet more corruption, as those left out come to feel they have no choice but to pay their way to contracts, jobs and services.

Understanding corruption as arising in complex systems has several implications for how we should understand – and respond to – corruption.

A networked phenomenon

More than 20 years of research and practice have taught us that corruption is rarely the work of a few “rotten apples” acting alone. It is typically a highly networked phenomenon, carried out by informal social networks whose members collude and coordinate to subvert the legal order.

These networks are remarkably resilient because they run on trust, reciprocity and the expectation that members will protect one another. This helps explain why corruption so often persists even where legal frameworks are strong on paper.

Corruption adapts and evolves

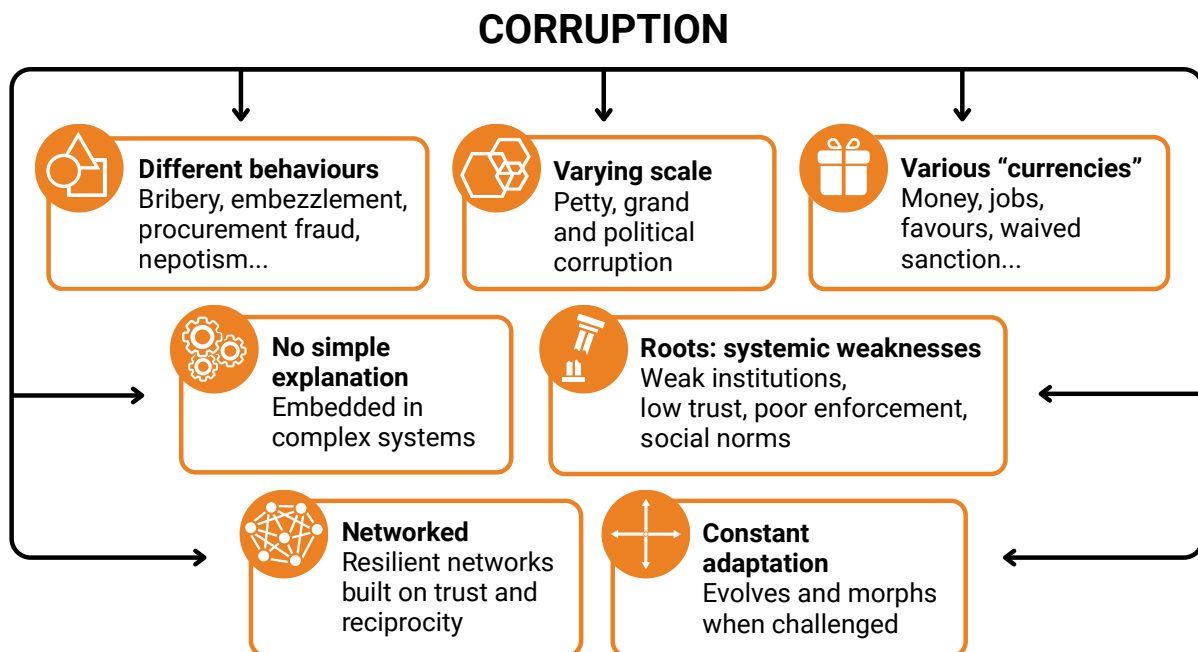
Finally, corruption adapts to changes in its environment – especially where it serves a function.

For example, where corruption plays a role in keeping illicit goods flowing along trafficking routes, tightening border controls alone is unlikely to decrease the flow of goods while supply and demand remain strong. Instead, corruption will likely morph – become more extortive or target a different group of public officials – or be displaced to other border checkpoints.

Another example is when corruption acts as the de facto mechanism for allocating scarce public services when budgets are insufficient to meet demand. In such cases, stronger anti-bribery measures may incentivise more clandestine practices. They may even generate more corruption, if people must bribe not only the service provider but also officials in charge of monitoring in order to obtain better quality services.

The point is that as long as underlying drivers go unaddressed – be they transnational demand for illicit goods, underfunded and overwhelmed public services, or others – corrupt strategies will evolve to outpace stronger controls and will make use of new knowledge and technologies to do so.

Our understanding of corruption must therefore be forward-looking and proactive, treating it as the multifaceted phenomenon that it is.



Learn more

Learn more about specific aspects of corruption with these related Quick Guides:

- [Corruption sanctions](#)
- [Border corruption](#)
- [Strategic corruption](#)
- [Corruption and security](#)
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