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Leveraging informal networks for anti-corruption in East Africa

Citizens and business people may invest significant time and money in building informal networks with public officials to overcome public service delivery shortcomings and access business opportunities. Understanding these networks better can strengthen anti-corruption efforts.

What's the problem?

Corruption is frequently associated with money alone and the behaviours of a few individual “bad apples” operating in otherwise healthy governance systems.

This is too simplistic. Corruption is a networked phenomenon.

Citizens and business people often face challenges accessing public services or competing for contracts on an even playing field. Building informal networks with public officials through connections and corruption helps to solve this problem.

Informal networks work well in these constrained environments. In such contexts, conventional anti-corruption measures, such as introducing more regulations, policies or controls, can backfire and increase corruption. More people are coopted and bribed to achieve the same goals.

By examining these informal networks, could we find better ways to fight corruption?

What we did



Where?

Uganda and Tanzania.



Who?

Interviews with citizens, entrepreneurs and low-level public officials.



Why?

To explore when, how and why informal networks are built and used to access public services or business opportunities corruptly.

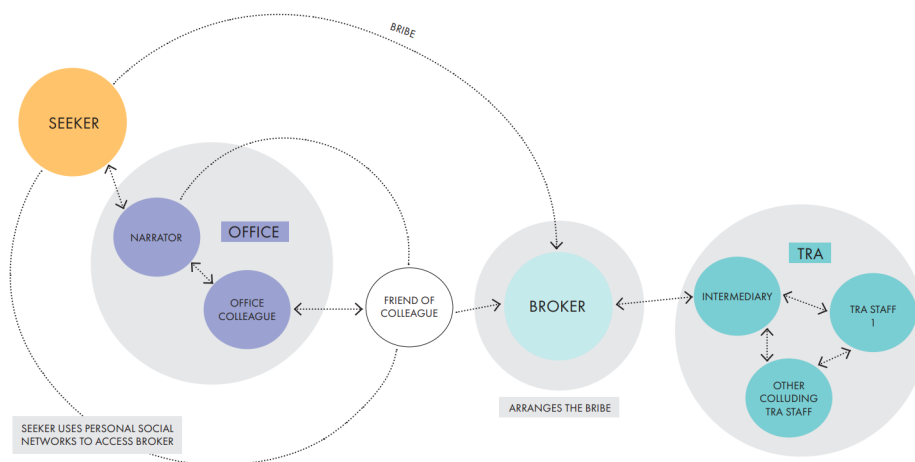


How?

Development and analysis of 10 mini-case studies (six from Tanzania and four from Uganda) that describe informal networks associated with bribery and procurement fraud.

What we found

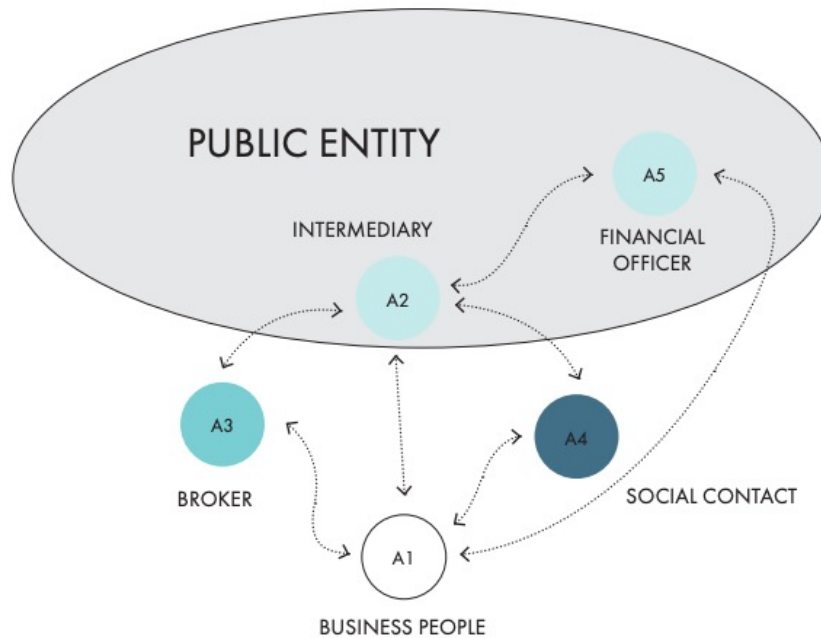
- Citizens and business people build informal networks with public officials as a strategic tool to “get things done” with and within government departments.
- Informal networks ease access to public services, help to secure business opportunities with the government and help businesses run smoothly.
- These informal networks are held together by personal relations, corruption and other monetary exchanges.
- Conventional anti-corruption measures that seek to strengthen rules and increase regulation can, in some contexts, lead to more corruption as more people need to be coopted and bribed.
- Addressing hurdles in accessing public services or government contracts – i.e. addressing red tape – can be a way to tackle corruption both from the demand and the supply sides.
- Social norms that govern the networks, including solidarity and reciprocity, can actually be targeted to support anti-corruption.
- We can also go further and harness the power of informal networks for anti-corruption. One example is anti-corruption Collective Active initiatives, which can help bring multiple stakeholders together in a “network of the good” to tackle corruption in specific contexts.



*A case study from Tanzania depicting the informal “network of friends (**mtandao**)” who helped speed up the long process of applying for a tax clearance certificate “in exchange for a little something (**kitu kidogo**)”.*

Why it matters

- Informal networks can drive privileged or undue access to public resources.
- Those without money or connections bear the costs, and trust in institutions weakens further, creating a vicious cycle.
- Anti-corruption practitioners could achieve a lot more by shifting their focus to addressing the problems that corruption solves.
- “Good” networks involving stakeholders from business, government and civil society can also be a powerful force against corrupt informal networks.



The “brokers (kayungirizi)” from a Ugandan case study who win tenders and then informally re-sell contracts to business people in the transport and tour sector.

Where to learn more



Introductory webinar

How can you harness informality to design anti-corruption interventions?



Policy briefs for practitioners

Informal networks and what they mean for anti-corruption practice



Policy brief

It takes a network to defeat a network – What Collective Action practitioners can learn from research into corrupt networks



Field research

Informal networks as investment in East Africa



Public governance research and assistance

Explore: baselgovernance.org/publicgovernance
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About this Research Case Study

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Keywords

- Informal networks
- Informal governance
- Social norms
- Anti-corruption
- Behavioural research
- Tanzania
- Uganda