Understanding the enemy
Insights from corrupt networks to improve anti-corruption Collective Action initiatives

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About this Working Paper

This Working Paper explores the networked nature of corruption and the opportunities this presents for anti-corruption efforts. The aim is to understand how shifting the unit of analysis from individuals to networks helps to understand the persistence and resilience of corruption, while opening up new anti-corruption perspectives to promote better outcomes. A meta-analysis of findings from more than 15 years of research on informal networks and corruption underpins the conceptualisation of corrupt networks.

The paper argues that a focus on networks helps to shed light on the functionality of corruption and the underlying social norms that enable corruption to occur, from petty bribery to large-scale public procurement fraud. We believe that understanding the structures, functions and modus operandi of the informal networks associated with corruption can inform the design of improved anti-corruption activities – in particular anti-corruption Collective Action initiatives.

The Working Paper connects the work of the Basel Institute's **Prevention, Research and Innovation** team with the activities of the Private Sector team. The Prevention, Research and Innovation team conducts research on the root causes of corruption, develops evidence- and network-based anti-corruption approaches and provides training and technical assistance on relevant political and social aspects on these topics. The **Private Sector** team takes a dual approach to engaging and strengthening the private-sector response to corruption risks in business transactions: by advancing anti-corruption Collective Action, and through advice and technical assistance to private corporations and state-owned enterprises.

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Executive summary

This Working Paper reflects on the networked nature of corruption and the lessons that can be learned from studying it. Particularly, it provides insights into the opportunities and challenges of designing and implementing anti-corruption Collective Action initiatives.

The authors consider corruption not as a series of isolated acts by individuals, but as the outcome of complex, resilient informal networks embedded within socio-political, economic and cultural structures. Within this framework, they investigate how shifting the unit of analysis from individuals to networks can improve our understanding of the persistence of corruption and create new perspectives to promote better anti-corruption outcomes and impacts.

Drawing on over 15 years of empirical research across diverse countries and regions, the authors argue that corruption must be viewed through a network lens. This approach reveals how informal connections facilitate rule subversion, problem-solving and goal achievement where formal institutions are weak or ineffective.

The paper contends that a focus on networks sheds light on the functionality of corruption and the underlying social norms enabling corrupt exchanges. Understanding the structures, functions and modus operandi of the informal networks associated with corruption can help design better anti-corruption initiatives.

The Working Paper contributes to the existing literature on corruption strategies and anti-corruption activities.

First, the authors explore how **informal networks rooted in trust, reciprocity and social norms can serve practical functions**, including accessing public services, boosting business profitability and winning elections. The strength of informal networks lies in their adaptability, internal organisation and embeddedness in local cultures.

The authors identify **six core roles in informal networks** that pursue corrupt objectives: seekers, doers, brokers, facilitators, intermediaries and instigators. The coordination and division of tasks among these six roles make such informal networks effective in achieving their goals.

In addition, the authors unpack **the most important strategies these corrupt informal networks rely on** for their functioning. These strategies are:

- co-optation (recruitment and trust building);
- control (discipline and compliance);
- camouflage (concealment and legitimacy); and
- coordination (task orchestration and adaptability).

Second, the authors set out **concrete implications for anti-corruption activities** based on insights on how informal networks operate. They state that traditional top-down, normative approaches often fail due to the functionality of corruption (i.e., corruption is always a means to an end) and the social embeddedness of corrupt networks.

The authors propose to apply the network logic to anti-corruption strategies. This paper particularly focuses on **Collective Action initiatives** and suggests that these should emulate positive aspects of informal networks. Collective Action refers to collaborative efforts – typically involving businesses, civil society and/or public institutions – to tackle corruption risks and shared integrity challenges that no single actor can resolve alone.

This means that, to be effective, these Collective Action initiatives must be based on:

- **Functional goals:** Set short-term, tangible goals aligned with participants' interests.

- **Strategic co-optation:** Recruit key stakeholders strategically, including those who are prone to corruption risks, by using trust-building mechanisms that can supply an added value to the stakeholders.

- **Transparency and accountability:** Leverage mechanisms of peer pressure and reputation management that can ensure sustained commitment and engagement among participants and deter free-riding strategies.

In conclusion, to foster integrity in today's fragmented and conflict-prone world, anti-corruption initiatives generally must shift from targeting individuals to targeting the networks that sustain corruption. Sustainable change requires locally rooted, trust-based collective efforts that provide functional, credible and coordinated alternatives to illicit networks.

In this sense, Collective Action initiatives built on conceptualising corruption as a networked problem can be an effective solution for achieving anti-corruption goals.

Table of contents

1   Introduction

One factor that limits the success of many anti-corruption interventions is that the underlying assumptions are not in line with the evidence regarding how corruption happens.

Conventional anti-corruption methods assume that corruption is committed by individuals involved in principal-agent relationships (Rose-Ackerman, 1996). This model assumes that actors are rational and act based on cost–benefit calculations. The agent – for example, an individual public official – exploits their informational advantages vis-à-vis their principal – their superior/the state –, putting their own interests before those of the government employer. The proposed solutions therefore target the individual, for instance through incentives and sanctions.

Evidence shows, however, that corruption is a networked phenomenon that arises from entrenched social, economic and political interactions. It is orchestrated through coordination between groups and clusters of individuals. This paper discusses how shifting the unit of analysis from individuals to networks can improve anti-corruption outcomes.

Adopting a network lens highlights the collective and instrumental nature of corruption and its key features, functions and roles (Baez Camargo et al., 2021, 2022a; Persson et al., 2013). This analytical framework can help improve the design of anti-corruption interventions by learning from what makes corruption networks effective and resilient.

This perspective is timely for today's conflict-prone and fluid world: states have to cope with challenges that are, often, fuelled by the activities of illicit networks constructed to facilitate and coordinate the flow of inputs, resources and information. For example, autocratic networks accumulate power and resources for the benefit of the ruling elites and weaponise anti-corruption actions against political opponents (Tapscott, 2021; Applebaum, 2024).

No less, a network approach helps us to explore the interaction between contemporary states and informality and to highlight why corruption is so persistent (Migdal, 1988).

The Working Paper is based on findings collected through over 15 years of empirical research conducted in a number of countries, including Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda (Baez Camargo, 2017; Baez Camargo et al., 2017; Baez Camargo et al., 2022b; Costa, 2017, 2022b).

For example, it highlights evidence from fieldwork in Kampala and Dar es Salaam: Interviews were conducted with citizens and business people to explore in great detail how they navigate the interactions with the public sector and build informal networks (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b; Lugolobi, 2021; Mukono, 2021).

We have previously touched upon the overall topic of this Working Paper – namely that we can apply our learnings about informal networks for anti-corruption endeavours – in Policy Brief 8 and Policy Brief 9, published in 2021 and 2022 (Baez Camargo et al., 2021, 2022a). This Working Paper, however, delves deeper into conceptualising how the analysis of informal and corrupt networks can contribute to designing and implementing better anti-corruption Collective Action initiatives.

To achieve this goal, the authors have returned critically to their previous findings and condensed them into a solid conceptual framework. In addition, they have identified those macro-patterns of behaviours and strategies that can contribute to strengthening anti-corruption Collective Action initiatives.

2 Informal networks and networked corruption

This section introduces the concept of **informal networks as relational structures based on personal relationships, shared cultural codes and common social norms**.

These relational structures are central to shaping the dynamics of informality and its norms and practices through which corruption is most often enacted. Informal networks serve as a relational space where formal and informal institutions interact. No less, they are the space through which informal practices are maintained, adapted and reproduced (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b; Minbaeva et al., 2023; Owen-Smith and Powell, 2008; Padgett and Powell, 2012).[1]

In this regard, the weaker the performance of the state's formal institutions, the more developed and resilient the practices of informal networks (Baez Camargo and Costa, 2023; Bayart, 2009; Blundo and de Sardan, 2006; Migdal, 1988).

Following Minbaeva et al. (2023), we use the term "informal networks" to emphasise the interplay between formal and informal spheres that occurs during different acts of corruption (Baez Camargo and Koechlin, 2018; Costa et al., 2021; Gupta, 1995; Ledeneva, 2009). Informal networks appear to be the means by which demand and supply for corruption are integrated. They link individuals whose needs or wishes require the subversion of formal rules with those who have the power to enable this subversion.

Informal networks are functional, requiring an internal division of roles and certain management functions (Baez Camargo and Ledeneva, 2017; Baez Camargo et al., 2022b). The following sections examine how informal networks emerge in contexts characterised by weak formal institutions, become key governance mechanisms and lead to an increase in corruption. Corruption, then, arises as a problem-solving tactic in the face of ineffective formal institutions.

2.1 Functionality of corruption and the goals of informal networks

Evidence shows that corruption is functional insofar as it facilitates the achievement of concrete goals. This section explores three goals of informal networks linked to corruption, namely: (1) facilitating access to public services; (2) increasing business profitability; and (3) winning elections (Baez-Camargo et al., 2022b; Marquette and Peiffer, 2021; Slingerland, 2021).

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[1]   For this Working Paper, we adopt Alena Ledeneva's definition of informality, which states that "informality refers to the ways of getting things done to meet human needs", pointing to "the world's open secrets, unwritten rules and hidden practices that elude articulation in official discourse but reveal the 'know-how' of what works for problem-solving as it is known in the vernacular" (Ledeneva, 2024, p. 5).

2.1.1 Accessing public services

Accessing public services is challenging in many countries. There are several reasons why this might be the case. For example, certain essential public services, such as health and education, are meant to be provided free of charge to all citizens, but they may not be endowed with the resources to do so. This problem of resource scarcity often leads to significant gaps in accessibility (e.g. long queues at the health facility or stockouts of medicines) and quality (e.g. teachers in public schools are ill-qualified and schools improperly equipped) (Boyer et al., 2024; Hanefeld et al., 2017; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

Another challenge is when inordinately bureaucratic procedures make official processes, such as obtaining a driver's license or opening a business, long and complicated to navigate (Lugolobi, 2021; Mukono, 2021). In this context, it is useful to have an informal network with connections to service providers who can help you jump the queue at the health facility, secure a place for your child at a good school and speed up cumbersome processes.

Our research has shown how **bribery is used as an instrument to recruit service providers into one's informal network in order to obtain privileged treatment when accessing public services** (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b). For example, research activities in Uganda have revealed that informal networks and bribes are used to obtain driver's licenses without going through the long formal process (Lugolobi, 2021).

While the bribe works to address the issue at hand, these practices appear to be **deeply connected with local understandings and meanings**. This means that the corrupt exchange is seamlessly interwoven with elements of sociability and justification. This is a crucial point that explains why these informal networks are resilient.

For example, local norms of gift giving and obligations to reciprocate perpetuate the exchange into the future (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b). Helpful service providers are recommended across social connections, and the networks grow. A transactional logic is deployed over a long time horizon, confirming a basic tenet of network dynamics: Reciprocity manifests itself in economies of favours or bribes, which underpins the persistence of bribery in service provision (Baez Camargo, 2017; Ledeneva, 1998; Walton and Jackson, 2020).

2.1.2 Increasing business profitability

Informal networks can facilitate business activities, increase profitability and help acquire opportunities within the public sector. For example, establishing a network with public officials can help to obtain insider information, neutralise market competition and win government contracts (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b).

In a case from Tanzania, a transport company was confronted with challenges related to traffic enforcement and ruthless competition from other operators. To ensure smooth operations, this company set up a bribery network

involving conductors, traffic police, bus agents and the transport regulators, thus ensuring a competitive advantage for company vehicles by avoiding roadblocks, speed cameras and fines (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b).

Also, **public procurement fraud** is often achieved through informal networks involving potential contractors and the officials responsible for writing tenders, awarding contracts and monitoring implementation. In Uganda, for example, a limited number of qualified contractors in the chemical sector colluded with each other and the public procurement authorities to organise a rota whereby each of these businesses would be awarded contracts at inflated prices for their goods (Lugolobi, 2021).

Such networks can be large and multi-layered, especially where legislation imposes strict procurement procedures and controls. Overcoming these requires more people to be brought into the network.

This was the case in Italy, where high-level bureaucrats in the Ministry of Infrastructure and an entrepreneur who owned companies in the construction sector co-opted a large number of officials across the public sector into an informal network. This co-optation served to speed up and unblock procedures and payments, direct administrative decisions and control actions in administrative and accounting courts. All these objectives were achieved thanks to the exchange of bribes and other favours that enabled the informal network to be set up. The continuity and regularity of contacts, the definition of hierarchies, the division of labour between actors and the presence of security measures were important for this network (Costa, 2017).

2.1.3   Winning elections

Political elections represent a period of heightened competition that can create incentives for corruption because stakes are high for political and business elites.

An important incentive for building up and activating informal networks during elections is the need for large amounts of financial resources. Running for office can be prohibitively expensive in high, medium and low-income countries alike. The cost of political communication, the development of strategic direction and the mobilisation of a bureaucratic apparatus is high almost everywhere and often requires contributions from party structures, private figures, entrepreneurs and interest groups.

The need for financial resources becomes exacerbated when political elites attempt to manipulate election results via fraudulent practices, such as vote trading. **Informal networks involving business interests are often sought to finance electoral campaigns through non-transparent means**. Similarly, broad informal networks facilitate acquiring broad bases of support through patronage, which translates into votes.

Informal networks aimed at winning elections often encompass actors at the central and local government levels and a multitude of stakeholders including media houses and religious leaders. All of these actors can deliver votes,

influence and resources for the candidate(s) and/or help to demobilise the opposition (Golooba-Mutebi, 2018; Sambaiga et al., 2018).

What distinguishes the schemes of such informal networks from the usual activities of a democratic election are the informal understandings associated with the benefits accrued from participating in the network. In countries such as Tanzania and Uganda, support during elections is not associated with an ideological or policy platform. Rather, this support is connected to the expectation that, once the candidate(s) at the centre of the network are successful, the support of network members will be rewarded with preferential treatment and the opportunity to exploit state resources for private gain (Sambaiga et al., 2018).

Our insights from Mexico, Tanzania and Russia revealed that key political allies obtained high-level appointments with the unwritten understanding that they will be able to exploit their offices for their personal benefit and that of their constituencies with impunity (Baez Camargo and Ledeneva, 2017). In Uganda, private sector financiers of election campaigns subsequently receive valuable public contracts and undue tax exemptions (Golooba-Mutebi, 2018).

The flip side of this is that uninvolved businesses or those known to have links with opposition parties or figures are simply not awarded public contracts (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b).

2.2   Functional roles in informal networks

Insights from fieldwork in Uganda and Tanzania helped us identify six functional roles within informal networks (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b; Lugolobi, 2021; Mukono, 2021). Figure 1 visualises these functional roles while unpacking their placement and reciprocal relations within a corruption framework.
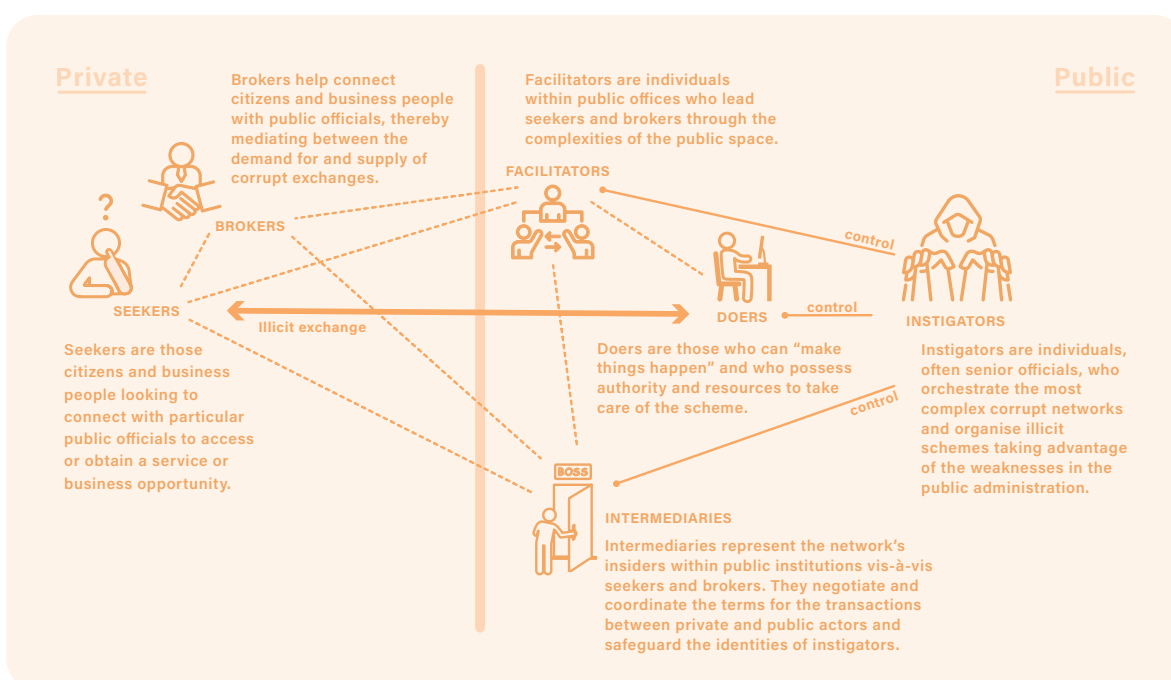

Figure 1:   Unpacking the functional roles in informal networks within a corruption framework.

This conceptualisation helps to further uncover the mechanisms that underpin the functional nature of corruption, enabling informal networks to achieve their ultimate goals. This nuance lends more conceptual depth to our understanding of the collective nature of corruption. Furthermore, unpacking the functions of different network members allows us to substantiate the view of corruption as a network-based mechanism.

At the centre of the corruption framework are the "seekers" and the "doers", between whom the illicit exchange takes place.

Seekers represent the demand side of corruption. They may be citizens or entrepreneurs seeking to connect with specific individuals in pursuit of a goal involving some transgression of the formal order. Examples of seekers from our research (Lugolobi, 2021; Mukono, 2021) include:

a. a Tanzanian entrepreneur applying for tax clearance who relies on bribes to access an informal network within the Tanzania Revenue Authority for fast-tracking processes that would otherwise be cumbersome;

b. citizens obtaining a driver's license in Uganda who bribe to access an informal network involving officials at the Face Technologies Office and vehicle inspectors to bypass medical exams, driving tests and obtain the document in a short period of time; or

c. businesses who wish to be awarded competitive tenders in spite of having a comparative market disadvantage vis-à-vis other contractors and establish a bribery network with those who execute and monitor the procurement process.

Doers represent the supply side of corruption. They are public servants and decision-makers who can make things happen. Common examples of doers are:

a. procurement officials who have the ability to manipulate tenders and award contracts;

b. the officials tasked with issuing licenses and permits, tax inspectors and so on;

c. law enforcement officials who intervene to ensure some cases are pursued but not others.

Some doers are instrumental simply by not acting, as in the case of individuals who are tasked with monitoring and control duties but look the other way to enable a corrupt transaction to take place.

Other functional roles enable or make more pervasive the relationship between seekers and doers.

Brokers possess social capital to connect seekers and doers. Brokers can be relational entrepreneurs who lack capital, assets or machinery, but who are rich in social connections with public officials and businesses.

In an example from Uganda, an individual provides services related to the land sector to citizens. His network involves a considerable number of public officials at the land registry offices who help him manoeuvre through a complex bureaucratic system. The broker builds and keeps investing in this informal network by dispensing money for each transaction that he wants to push through, thus ensuring that his services to clients are quick and effective (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b).

Facilitators are individuals who hold positions within public agencies and guide seekers and brokers through the public domain to facilitate corrupt transactions.

When investigating land management in Uganda, we found that public officials played this role, ensuring that the informal bribe-paying process was carried out quickly and smoothly. This involved monitoring the journey of documents, ensuring that specific files and folders did not get lost under a mountain of other paperwork and that the right public officials were activated and "motivated" to follow a given procedure.

Intermediaries are often gatekeepers for the insiders in public institutions, interacting with seekers and brokers to protect the identities of doers and instigators. They negotiate the terms for the transactions and coordinate communication and exchanges between private and public actors.

In a case from Uganda concerning the manipulation of the driving licence test, an intermediary separated the clients from the Police Inspector of Vehicles, who organised the corruption scheme. Basically, the intermediaries act as a buffer between external actors and actors within the public administration, with the aim of protecting the latter from denunciation and retaliation.

Complex networks are orchestrated by **instigators**, who organise and coordinate the illicit schemes. Normally, these are senior officials who exploit their position of authority and their power to control formal and informal processes in order to extract rents. To a certain extent, we can consider these actors as masters of puppets who pull the strings and give order to a corrupt scheme while benefiting from the illicit profits and other advantages.

Nevertheless, these instigators are often hidden behind a smokescreen defined by facilitators and intermediaries. For example, a senior Tanzanian official organised a public procurement fraud by involving and organising all those in charge of implementing and monitoring a formal, control-ridden public procurement process, thereby ensuring that the award was rigged in favour of the bribe-paying company. At the same time, his role was hidden thanks to the activities of his own colleagues and subordinates (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b).

2.3 Informal networks' management functions

Aside from the functional role typology, the research evidence on informal networks has also revealed a consistency across geographical contexts of the governance functions that allow informal networks to persist, be resilient and effective, and achieve the goals for which they have been created.

As visualised in Figure 2 below, these strategies are co-optation, control, camouflage and coordination (Baez Camargo and Ledeneva, 2017; Baez Camargo and Koechlin, 2018).

Co-optation

The term **"co-optation"** refers to the strategies and activities for recruiting individuals and clusters into informal networks.

Control

The term **"control"** refers to the strategies and activities for disciplining individuals who violate corrupt agreements, default on debts or demonstrate a lack of loyalty.

Camouflage

The term **"camouflage"** refers to the strategies and activities for protecting networks by disguising their illicit activities and hiding members' identities to reduce the risk of detection.

Coordination

The term **"coordination"** refers to the strategies and activities for managing the timely activation of individuals and clusters and the distribution of tasks, duties and responsibilities.
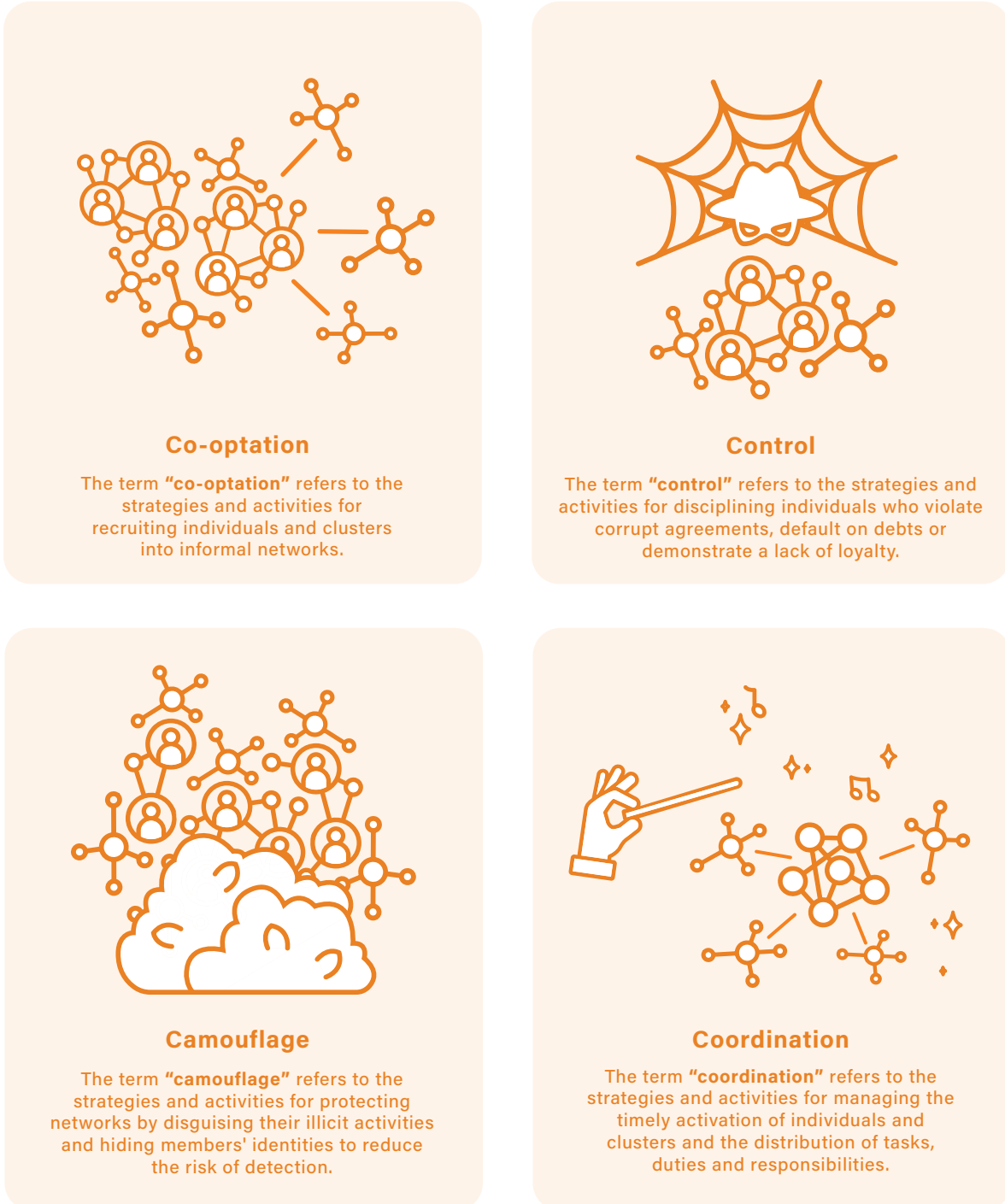
Figure 2: Governance functions of informal networks.

2.3.1 Co-optation

Co-optation refers to the recruitment of individuals into networks. Baez Camargo and Ledeneva (2017) describe how strategically relevant actors are incorporated into the informal networks of political elites to ensure political survival. The term can be broadly applied to the process by which seekers and instigators attract individuals into their informal networks to achieve their goals.

Incorporating new individuals ensures the networks' expansion, renewal and intergenerational transition (Golooba-Mutebi, 2018). The process of co-optation involves recruiting doers, facilitators and intermediaries needed to achieve the goals of the informal network. In addition, the process of co-optation may involve the recruitment of brokers to facilitate access to the doers, facilitators or intermediaries (Gould and Fernandez, 1989; Jancsics, 2015; Morselli and Roy, 2008). It may also involve the recruitment of individuals who bring skills to the network, such as financial experts who manage illicit transactions and conceal the criminal proceeds (Costa, 2022a, 2022b).

Co-optation requires trust to cement relationships. This is why informal networks are frequently structured around kinship (Hamid, 2014; Smith, 2001). Other important sources for recruiting trustworthy and loyal individuals are friends and acquaintances sharing common backgrounds from school, army or work.

Trust also emerges from repeated interactions. For example, the reciprocity involved in the regular exchange of bribes gives relationships a sense of reliability and predictability. Therefore, care must be taken to maintain the trust by paying debts, reciprocating favours and respecting agreed conditions (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b). Co-optation does not involve one-off transactions. Rather, it is a process whereby sustained relationships are built. In addition, informal networks do not disappear once they have achieved their goals. Instead, they remain dormant and can be reactivated when needed.

2.3.2 Control

Control within informal networks involves disciplining individuals who violate corrupt agreements, default on debts or demonstrate a lack of loyalty. Excluding straying network members from the benefits of illicit exchanges and **making explicit or implicit threats** to damage their reputations, careers and livelihoods are some ways in which discipline can be enforced. This could involve blackmailing them with compromising information that has been gathered about them. Another effective tool to ensure discipline is the **selective enforcement of anti-corruption laws against dissenting network members** (Mesquita, 2018).

Where parties collude in criminal activities, it is the high costs of possible defection to all conspirators that can help to keep them disciplined and loyal to the network (Pérez-Chiqués and Meza, 2021).

Those actors who can credibly enforce threats have greater relative bargaining power within the network (Binmore, 2011; Verma et al., 2018). Those in positions of authority can threaten seekers to break corrupt agreements or sever ties with public officials if their requests are not met.

2.3.3 Camouflage

Camouflage practices protect networks by disguising their illicit activities and hiding members' identities to reduce the risk of detection.

Camouflaging can involve **publicly embracing a strong anti-corruption agenda and making highly visible commitments without the political will to implement them**. Those responsible for devising corrupt schemes often ensure that formal rules are being followed, even if in fact they are being manipulated or applied selectively. In the Ugandan case involving falsifying driving tests, those responsible for administering the tests regularly failed some (non-bribe paying) applicants to avoid suspicion of irregularities (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b).

The **use of intermediaries helps conceal the activities** of informal networks and mediate between illicit activities and individuals seeking anonymity. The case of the Odebrecht group and its system of bribing politicians and bureaucrats shows that intermediation can be carried out by lawyers, accountants and financial professionals (Costa, 2022b; Costa and Jancsics, 2024; Jancsics and Costa, 2023).

Finally, informal networks can provide security through compartmentalisation. This can be achieved by separating and isolating specific relational clusters within the scheme and restricting the flow of information (Costa, 2017; Jancsics and Costa, 2023).

2.3.4 Coordination

Coordination involves the timely **activation of the different nodes and relational clusters** which compose an informal network, as well as the **distribution of tasks and responsibilities** among them. It becomes more important as the network expands, when it becomes critical to orchestrate the co-optation and protection of multiple members.

Our research evidence supports the assertion that highly intricate networks require a higher degree of coordination between their components (Baez Camargo et al., 2022b; Costa, 2022a, 2022b). In cases of grand corruption, the coordination function may extend to managing links between agencies, departments and sectors across a whole country, if not across borders (Costa, 2017, 2022a).

3 Applying a network approach for anti-corruption

This paper proposes that the preceding analytical framework to understand the networked nature of corruption provides a basis to enhance existing anti-corruption actions. In particular, we advocate for applying the insights on how corrupt informal networks operate to develop anti-corruption network interventions.

Network interventions use social networks to influence decision-making processes and promote behavioural change. They have been championed in other fields, such as public health (Valente, 2012). The role of networks in achieving policy goals is a central tenet here, positing that public actors, civil society organisations and business must be integral participants in networked policy-making processes (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Milward and Provan, 2023).

For example, this approach can be applied to address practices of petty corruption through peer-led interventions that mobilise champions and tackle social norms that normalise bribery. We have demonstrated this in our work in a hospital in Tanzania (Baez Camargo et al., 2025).

This section outlines how a network lens can be adapted for anti-corruption purposes in the context of a particular type of anti-corruption intervention, namely, **Collective Action initiatives** (Baez Camargo et al., 2021, 2022a).

The material for this section is drawn from:

- a series of interviews conducted with Collective Action practitioners in 2021;

- a review of Collective Action initiatives from the B20 Collective Action hub repository hosted by the Basel Institute on Governance; and

- empirical research on Collective Action typologies (Wannenwetsch, 2025).

3.1 Anti-corruption Collective Action initiatives

Multi-stakeholder initiatives that bring governmental actors, business players and civil society organisations together are important for the anti-corruption domain because they reflect the multidimensionality of corruption. They furthermore reflect that, where corruption has become widespread and entrenched within the public fabric, addressing it requires efforts involving both non-state and state actors (Persson et al., 2013).

In principle, **bringing different stakeholder groups together** allows identifying common strategies and plans of action, and creating common pools of resources, skills and expertise **to facilitate the achievement of shared goals** (Reyes-Gonzalez et al., 2024; Søreide and Truex, 2011). In this sense, to the extent that they are problem-driven and bring together the different resources

and skills conducive to achieving their goals, multi-stakeholder engagements can resemble the characteristics of informal networks. In practice, however, anti-corruption multi-stakeholder initiatives are not always designed strategically to achieve concrete results beyond dialogue and the establishment of formal commitments.

Here, we focus our attention on a particular subcategory of anti-corruption multi-stakeholder initiatives, namely Collective Action initiatives. According to Wannenwetsch (2025, p. 14), what distinguishes Collective Action from generic multi-stakeholder actions is that, "while many multi-stakeholder initiatives have strong government or civil society leadership, Collective Action specifically focuses on the private sector and private sector issues and needs when it comes to raising standards of business integrity."

We find that the focus on Collective Action initiatives is especially relevant in view of recent developments that reflect the changing dynamics affecting the global anti-corruption domain. According to the World Bank (2008, p. 4)

> **"'Collective action' is a collaborative and sustained process of cooperation between stakeholders. It increases the impact and credibility of individual action, brings vulnerable individual players into an alliance of like-minded organizations and levels the playing field between competitors. Collective action can complement or temporarily substitute for and strengthen weak local laws and anti-corruption practices."**

We think this definition already provides elements to argue why a network perspective can help strengthen the effectiveness of such initiatives. Collective Action is about supporting the joint efforts of vulnerable players (seekers) to level the playing field. Furthermore, it is intended to provide functionality vis-à-vis poor state performance when anti-corruption laws and practices are weak.

Just as we have described above for the informal networks associated with corruption, we propose that Collective Action initiatives can benefit from **emphasising functional goals** for those participating, **recruiting strategically** in line with the goals and **devoting resources to manage and cultivate the connections** among network participants.

We anchor the analysis on what Wannenwetsch (2025, p. 17) identifies as the building blocks of Collective Action: (a) building trust through engagement; (b) working to influence the business environment by setting standards; and (c) ensuring a level of commitment needed to address the free rider problem.

3.1.1   Adopting a functionality lens for setting goals

Adopting a purely normative approach to promoting anti-corruption rarely works. That is, simply informing people that they must change their behaviour based on awareness of corruption, its impacts and the need to adopt ethical standards instilled in instruments such as codes of ethics is not effective in promoting meaningful, sustainable results (Peiffer and Cheeseman, 2023).

In the field of private sector compliance, evidence suggests that different modalities of information dissemination regarding compliance rules neither improve rule knowledge nor reduce corrupt behaviours compared to individuals who received no information at all (Kobis et al., 2022).

Based on the lessons learned from informal networks of corruption, we believe that setting standards may not be enough to encourage meaningful engagement with a Collective Action initiative unless a clear functionality element that appeals to participants' self-interest is embedded. This is especially the case when embracing new behaviours signifies being put at a disadvantage and/or being forced to incur onerous costs.

While citizens would prefer not to bribe, it will be hard to prevent them from doing so if they believe it might prevent their access to life-saving health treatment or education for their children. Similarly, small and medium business owners might still prefer to bribe if that is cheaper than setting up an anti-corruption compliance programme.

Therefore, **a key consideration for convening successful anti-corruption Collective Action initiatives is setting very concrete goals that respond to the needs and interests of the key constituencies**, who may otherwise continue to be incentivised to engage in corruption (Emerson et al., 2012).

Setting feasible, short-term and problem-solving goals is key in order to overcome a dilemma that many Collective Action initiatives face, especially when their main target audiences are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). For the most part, approaches predicated solely on building stronger compliance systems tend to impose a triple burden on SMEs. In fact, implementing compliance reforms involves high short-term costs that are hard to absorb for small businesses. In addition, the benefits of abstaining from informal solutions are uncertain, whereas the costs of being side-lined by corrupt public officials and losing out to competitors who continue to rely on corruption are immediate and certain.

There is, therefore, a dilemma that works against the incentives to adopt a purely normative approach. This strongly points to the need to incorporate a clear problem-solving angle to Collective Action initiatives, just as the informal networks provide short-term solutions to the needs of seekers.

Differently put, even if an initiative is ambitious and may result in positive outcomes for participants in the long run, stakeholders should find that it serves their self-interest in the short term. Stakeholders will only compellingly engage when the action is addressing their pressing needs.

Prioritising short-term gains can help avert the centrifugal forces that can undermine anti-corruption networks (Milward and Provan, 2023). This can mean mobilising a multi-stakeholder network to enable alternatives to the corrupt action. For instance, if bribery by businesses is fuelled by the extortive actions of public officials, the goal of anti-corruption initiatives could be to provide channels for reporting abusive behaviour and to make legal support available to those who do so.

A good example is **the Maritime Anti-Corruption Network's (MACN) successful anonymous incident reporting system** for submitting reports of corrupt demands faced during port operations. This provides an alternative to simply giving in to a bribery request. It also links directly to problem-driven network initiatives undertaken by MACN members (maritime companies) in the countries where they are registered. The goal is to find solutions to the problems revealed through the reporting mechanism.

This was the case in Argentina, where the MACN reporting mechanism triggered additional research and delivered evidence-based insights about the exorbitant amounts of bribes in Argentinian ports. The evidence was key to bringing together strategically important stakeholders, including high-level government actors and union representatives, to discuss how to address this problem.

This Collective Action initiative led to the drafting of new regulations, which included representation from the chambers of importers and exporters. The process involved intensive communication and negotiation between all the different stakeholders and resulted in a very ambitious reform proposal for the maritime industry. The result was a private, fully digital surveillance system with government oversight, which increased transparency enormously and led to a significant reduction in bribe demands.

3.1.2 Recruiting strategically and building trust

Another building block of Collective Action involves building trust, which raises the question: trust among whom? We can link this directly to the co-optation strategy of informal networks. The insights from our research show the **importance of identifying who needs to be on board in order to achieve the network's goals**.

The conveners of Collective Action initiatives play a role akin to that of the instigators in the informal networks, who devote a great deal of time and energy to co-optation (Emerson et al., 2012). Who gets co-opted – i.e. brought to the table – is crucial. It is clear that it is not enough to have a critical mass of seekers – i.e. private sector actors and businesses seeking to address common integrity challenges – on board. As one Collective Action practitioner shared in an interview:

> "We try to make a business case for companies that there is a good chance the economics of corruption will fade away [by adopting stronger compliance measures] and we will get a better functioning economy. But that doesn't really motivate people, only those that are ethical already."

This means **going beyond engaging with stakeholders that are already committed to integrity**. Thinking strategically about co-optation may involve proactively recruiting those individuals or entities who routinely engage in corrupt activities and finding the right incentives to steer them away from that.

Co-opting strategically also almost invariably requires engaging the government for credibility and impact. However, here, the buy-in of only high-level actors might also not be enough and subsequent recruitment of government stakeholders should proceed in a problem-driven fashion. As the needs of seekers are better understood, the inclusion of specific state stakeholders, for example, tax inspectors or customs officials, can be sought.

Conveners might also want to consider co-opting brokers, such as well-connected and reputationally sound non-governmental or civil society organisations, into the anti-corruption network. In many contexts, stakeholders often do not speak to each other and might not even be aware of each other's activities, even if they are striving for similar outcomes.

Co-opting opinion leaders and trend setters – actors that can give credibility – can play a central role in triggering previously undecided stakeholders to join the Collective Action initiative.

As in corrupt networks, co-optation in Collective Action is not a one-off task. Trust between the members should be cultivated, which is also the case for anti-corruption activities (Milward and Provan, 2023). Promoting constant, regular and predictable activities and outputs over time is of paramount importance as it helps stakeholders demonstrate each other's engagement, commitment and trustworthiness (Emerson et al., 2012). Indeed, building trust happens through regular interactions involving reciprocal exchanges.

As documented by Power (2024), in order to build sustainability of any initiative aimed at promoting long-term behaviour change, regular and predictable contact involving reciprocal exchanges is the way in which stakeholders build trust, shared norms and a common narrative around their collective identity.

In this regard, it is important to start with smaller, achievable goals that incentivise the network members to interact with each other. As one practitioner described the experience of a Collective Action initiative involving SMEs, regular interactions and problem-solving discussions promoted the emergence of a catalogue of benefits that the members of the initiative were willing to share with each other, such as discounts, packages of support and free training.

3.1.3 Enhancing commitment: managing and nurturing anti-corruption networks

A central concern for Collective Action initiatives is preventing participants from defaulting on their obligations and benefiting from the initiative's provisions without contributing (free rider problem), or, alternatively, utilising their membership to whitewash their image.

Looking at this from a network perspective, it is about how to exercise the **control function**. Some initiatives, like the Thai Collective Action against Corruption initiative, adopt straightforward control approaches, subjecting members to regular independent audits and external monitoring processes (Wannenwetsch, 2025).

Peer pressure and reputational risk can be meaningful alternatives to enhance compliance. For example, MACN has an interesting mechanism for incentivising members to strengthen their compliance systems: Each member is to submit an annual self-assessment, showing how their activities have had an impact on improving the quality of their compliance infrastructures and how this is contributing to the achievement of the network's anti-corruption goals. Members subsequently get back a dashboard showing how they are performing compared to other members. Experience indicates that companies like that, and peer pressure and competition stimulate changes.

In corrupt informal networks, control and camouflage are closely connected. The fact that members are assured they are protected from detection and sanctions reinforces the incentives provided by the direct punishment mechanisms to maintain discipline. We argue that in Collective Action initiatives a similar interaction takes place. However, **in the context of anti-corruption activities, the functional equivalent of camouflage is transparency**. Transparency – which includes making a wider audience aware of the commitments made by stakeholders – is critical to generating incentives to adhere to the practices advocated by the initiative.

Transparency can have internal and external projections. Within anti-corruption networks, candid communication among partners can help increase trust. It also creates internal visibility regarding the division of roles, commitments, planned contributions and so on. This creates an environment of multidirectional accountability among initiative members (Jiao, 2021).

Externally, a well-designed and targeted communication is key to the success of anti-corruption interventions (Baez Camargo and Schönberg, 2023). Involving the media to give public visibility to the commitments, activities and, ultimately, results yielded by the Collective Action initiatives is another way to increase the costs for participants if they defect or fail to fulfil their part.

This furthermore reinforces the notion that, **in contexts where corruption has been normalised, interventions require adequate visibility to challenge conventional wisdom, promote new behaviours and bring stakeholders on board** (Baez Camargo, 2017b).

Finally, when it comes to coordination, Collective Action practitioners' experience suggests the need for a function to **monitor and evaluate progress** as a prerequisite to optimise communication flows, ensure engagement and promote confidence-building interactions (Binder, 2024).

As an example of a mature Collective Action initiative, the MACN offers good lessons about the centrality of a good coordination function for ensuring the network is able to consistently achieve its goals and evolve in response to changing environments. In this regard, MACN has developed a series of methodologies and programmes that members are expected to implement and abide by, such as compliance programme requirements, risk assessments and internal controls.

MACN convenes over 220 companies, which highlights the importance of the role played by its Secretariat. The Secretariat is responsible for orchestrating the coordination function by overseeing the implementation of MACN's strategic workplans and managing daily activities with members, third parties and funders.

4   Concluding remarks

This paper concludes with some final reflections on the implications of using a network lens to deal with corruption in a fractionalised, conflict-prone world.

Anti-corruption efforts should not underestimate the power of informal networks. Networks are not simply a collection of individuals; they have qualities that are greater than the sum of their parts. Such networks are characterised by the interconnectedness of their members, which enables the transfer of information and resources. The information that passes through the network is diverse. Some of it is consciously perceived, while some of it is unconsciously assimilated.

At the same time, informal networks have capabilities that are neither monitored nor acknowledged by the people who use them. The behaviours that prevail in networks impact the perceptions of what is acceptable behaviour.

Furthermore, there is evidence that **networks facilitate the social contagion of behaviours** (Christakis and Fowler, 2013; Huang et al., 2014). Patterns of behaviour that are normalised within social networks can override the personal preferences of members. This happens through peer pressure, expectations, fear of social sanctions and the tendency to conform to the group. No less, such influences can be key to perpetuating patterns of corruption. Anti-corruption practitioners should consider that, as well as whether the same influences might be used to promote integrity and empower people to resist corruption.

The above also means that we must acknowledge the **resilience, flexibility, adaptability and persistence of informal networks**. Even in the face of an effective criminal justice system, investigations into isolated individuals can allow network fragments to persist. If new links are formed connecting the remaining nodes and clusters, these can become the basis for future network reconfigurations.

This means that corruption can't be combated and prevented by focusing on detection and law enforcement alone. It is also critical to **address the functionality of informal networks to achieve concrete political, social and economic goals**.

Anti-corruption interventions in the contemporary world should thus be tuned to recognise that informal networks are valuable to those who partake in them, be it for accessing life-saving services where the state is weak, but also for powerful political and financial elites to stay in power and maximise their profits. Anti-corruption actions that go after punishing individuals for acts of corruption without addressing those root issues will not have a lasting impact.

Much effort needs to be invested in **strengthening public services, improving the ease of doing business and advocating for strong electoral campaign financing rules** that lend transparency and provide information that can reveal undue influences affecting the decisions and actions of governments.

Ultimately, this means that it is necessary to combine ambition, feasibility and sustainability by **developing concrete, locally rooted solutions**. The informal networks linked to corruption are effective for those who partake in them and are resilient because they are emergent. That is, they come together out of the attempts from local stakeholders to solve their problems. They involve trial and error while building on and reinforcing context-relevant social norms.

We have provided some ideas of how Collective Action initiatives can be strengthened through the adoption of a network lens. An additional corollary of these ideas is to advocate for greater emphasis on **supporting and nurturing spaces where local stakeholders can interact and find collaborative solutions to their problems that do not involve resorting to corruption**.

This can be an effective way of better aligning international best practices with the variety of characteristics found in local contexts, thereby increasing the feasibility and sustainability of this kind of anti-corruption initiative.

Bringing people together around shared goals that prevent corruption can be an antidote to polarisation. **Building trust** should be a crucial complement to formal prevention and enforcement measures; it encourages people to take ownership of efforts to strengthen institutions and democratic regimes.

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