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# Corruption, informality and social norms

Introductory overview

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Whether or not anti-corruption measures to improve natural resource management and conservation succeed is largely conditioned by context. Social norms are the unwritten rules of a society, and they can help explain people's corrupt behaviour. Informal systems and networks that steer people's behaviour can both facilitate and mitigate corruption. Programme design should therefore be informed by careful analysis to understand social norms and values in the targeted region.

## Main points

- Social norms are the unwritten rules of a society that guide and shape behaviour. They can help explain why people participate in corrupt actions and how they interpret conservation and responsible natural resource management.
- Knowledge about social norms can inform better anti-corruption responses in conservation and natural resource management.
- There is no single 'norm of corruption'. Rather, there are norms that, in certain conditions, may promote corrupt behaviour.
- Norms need to be addressed carefully – avoiding 'good/bad' labels.
- Informal systems and networks can both facilitate and mitigate corruption depending upon the context.

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## About the author

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Saul Mullard is a senior adviser at the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre and a civil society specialist with a background in historical sociology, development studies and South Asian studies. His research interests include the relationship between corruption and climate change and the role of local communities and indigenous peoples in addressing corruption and environmental protection. Mullard holds a doctorate and master's in South and Inner Asian Studies from the University of Oxford, as well as a BA in Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.

## The challenge

One of the enduring lessons of the last 20 or more years of anti-corruption practice is that the success of reform efforts and programmes are largely conditioned by context. Informal dynamics, as opposed to formal legal and institutional frameworks, are an often-overlooked element of context. Whereas traditional anti-corruption interventions are usually designed around the idea that strong institutions, formal rules, and systems of accountability encourage integrity, approaches based on social norms and informality look to other factors that influence behaviour.<sup>1</sup> These are the unwritten rules, values, and attitudes that govern how people in society should act and the informal relationships and social structures that inform those unwritten rules. These 'rules' are either rooted in shared attitudes and beliefs – a sense of right and wrong – or they are at least *believed* by most people to be rooted in such things. When corruption is viewed through a social norms lens – and the norms, values, attitudes, and informal dynamics that can drive corrupt actions in specific contexts are better understood – the failure of traditional anti-corruption approaches is easier to understand.

### Terms

#### **Informality**

A term that can include non-state forms of authority (eg tribal councils, leaders, religious authority), informal structures and networks (eg patron-client relationships, customary networks of kinship, region, ethnicity), social norms, and values.

#### **Values**

General standards that define what is 'good' and 'bad'.

#### **Social norms**

Rules and expectations of how people should behave in different situations.

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1. Jackson and Köbis 2018.

**Attitudes**

Influenced by values; 'likes' or 'dislike' of things, people, or objects. Values are applied through attitudes that are expressed verbally or through behaviour.

**Formal and informal authority**

Formal authority generally comes from a formal position within an organisation or the state, whereas informal authority comes from social relationships and respect of others based on non-state roles such as tribal or village councils, religious leaders, customary organisations, chiefs or non-formal 'royalty'.<sup>\*</sup> Private, third sector, or major religious organisations can have both formal and informal authority depending upon context.

*\* In the case of royalty, their authority normally comes from the fact that they once held formal authority, but the extent to which they have influence may well be dependent upon informal authority. Examples may include relationships and networks they maintain and the respect they gain.*

## Understanding corruption in terms of norms, values, and informality

From this perspective, corruption is a behaviour that rests on the formal and informal structure of social relations, values, attitudes, and norms in a society. For example, corruption may be related to norms about exchange and reciprocity. In some societies, exchange of gifts strengthens social bonds and creates a need for reciprocity. When someone pays a bribe, therefore, the social need to reciprocate is strong, failure to do so creates an obligation or debt, and an inequality in the relationship between the individuals results. The recipient of a bribe will then seek to remove that obligation and the resulting inequality by offering something in exchange, in this case the good or service desired by the bribe payer.<sup>2</sup> Understanding these informal relationships and expectations helps explain why changing formal rules and laws is rarely a sufficient anti-corruption strategy.

Practices and norms that may influence participation in corruption are also shaped by material conditions.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, social values and norms emerge from interactions between individuals, groups, and socio-economic/power

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2. Graycar and Jancsics 2017; Torsello 2015.

3. Bentley and Mullard 2019.

structures, which can be both formalised and informal. While it may be difficult for frontline practitioners to change the socio-economic/power structures, awareness of these and the impact on prevailing norms within a context can be used in refining programme design and ensuring relevance. For example, interventions aiming to work with politicians as environmental champions need to consider whether they are embedded in oligarchic networks that underpin natural resource corruption.

The concepts of norms, values and informality are abstract and often misused or simplified. When they are applied and understood in different contexts, however, they can help practitioners design and implement more effective ways of addressing corruption.

## Norms

In contrast to the often-heard evaluation that ‘corruption is the norm’ in a country, locality, industry, or sector, there is no single *norm* of corruption. Instead, there are norms that may, in certain contexts, promote corrupt behaviour. Two types of social norms may play this role. *Descriptive norms* are based on the perceived *frequency of a behaviour* – for example, ‘everybody does it’.<sup>4</sup> An *injunctive norm* refers to *socially appropriate behaviour* – for example, ‘it is right to show gratitude when someone helps you’.

Social norms do not necessarily have to align with one’s individual attitudes, and in some cases people follow a norm because they falsely believe that everyone agrees with it. This is called *pluralistic ignorance*. Behaviour that follows this type of norm is often easier to change because people realise that a specific norm is not universally accepted. Practitioners can use a social norms approach to change norms based on pluralistic ignorance to great effect, as the example of female genital mutilation has shown.

## Values

Likewise, when assessing how *values* may influence participation in corruption, absolutist interpretations are not helpful. Actions that may be interpreted as self-serving by one observer may be seen by another as generosity or loyalty. Sometimes a particular value may conflict with other values held by the same

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4. Bicchieri 2016; Bentley and Mullard 2019; Jackson and Köbis 2018.



person or group. For example, it is possible to hold self-enhancement values like ‘it is good to be successful and ambitious’ while simultaneously holding self-transcendence values like ‘helpfulness to friends and family is good’, or ‘equality, justice, and tolerance for all is important’.<sup>5</sup> As discussed further below, for anti-corruption initiatives and messages to be effective, they need to be based on an accurate understanding of the motivations – including values and norms – of the people involved.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, there is not one single form of *informal authority*. They can range from clan leadership, village councils, traditional religious authority, etc. Instead, as exemplified by the case of the Pardhi (see box below), care must be taken to understand how both informal authority and customary networks (such as clan) may influence the outcomes of anti-corruption and conservation interventions. These things are not necessarily ‘bad’ or ‘good’, and practitioners should be careful about attributing external values to customary authority and social norms.

## How values and norms can affect conservation and natural resource management

Adapting efforts to address corruption in conservation and natural resource management to suit the context of informality and prevailing social norms requires identifying how these can affect both anti-corruption and conservation efforts. A relevant example is the set of social taboos and informal institutions in Madagascar known as *Fady*. This is a system of social prohibitions that plays a prominent role in Malagasy culture and society. Research has shown this system of taboos has had a positive impact on conservation in the eastern rainforests of Madagascar, where certain animal species or areas of forest are forbidden by the ancestors. These taboos have led to the protection of threatened species, such as the Milne-Edwards's sifaka lemur (*Propithecus edwardsi*) and the fossa (*Cryptoprocta ferox*) in a context otherwise considered to be corruption-prone.<sup>7</sup> But social norms can be hard to sort out, and oversimplifying them may lead to inappropriate conclusions, as the Pardhi example shows.

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5. See Manfredo et al. 2016 for a typology of values.

6. See Hoffman and Patel 2017 for an example of such analysis from Nigeria.

7. Jones et al. 2008.

## The Pardhi caste in India: conservation models and social norms

The Pardhi were once famed and in high demand for their tracking skills by British hunters during the colonial period. They have since been driven to a marginal existence not only by the rigidity of the Indian caste system but also by the codification of their status under Indian Law (such as being effectively outlawed by the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act). Although this law was revoked in 1952, they continue to struggle against the label of criminality. Their situation was not made any better by the 2012 government order allowing rangers to shoot poachers on sight.

The formal and informal marginalisation of Pardhi communities by state and society has, no doubt, reinforced existing strong in-group kinship loyalty norms. In any situation like this, violation of norms may carry high social sanctions such as exclusion from kinship or social networks. While the majority of Pardhi work in precarious occupations in the informal sector, some are still involved in tiger poaching, as Kim Wall documented in 2014.

Some have argued that conservation efforts could make use of the skills of Pardhi poachers, but those who become rangers may face social exclusion from their families and kin group. Given that Pardhi are already institutionally marginalised because of their caste affiliation, without awareness and approaches that build trust between conservation practitioners and marginalised communities like the Pardhi, it is unrealistic to assume that many will violate kinship norms to become conservation activists or rangers. Particularly, where doing so individuals could risk further social exclusion.

In contrast to social norms and informal systems, which can offer entry points for conservation or anti-corruption efforts, values are more difficult to change. Values are more than moral goals, and they play an important function in creating and maintaining social cohesion. They are often deeply embedded in a society's material culture, behaviour and traditions. They also tend to be quite stable across generations.<sup>8</sup> As they are difficult to change, conservation efforts should build upon existing values, rather than seek to change them. For example, in the case of the Pardhi, inclusive community-led conservation rather

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8. Manfredo et al. 2016.

than a militarised approach would help to build trust and decrease the effects of historic marginalisation.

## Concluding remarks and recommendations

From these examples, it is clear that understanding social norms, values, and informality are important for anti-corruption, conservation, and natural resource management programmes. Indeed, over the last decade or so, there has been increasing interest in the effects of social norms and informality (particularly networks) in natural resource management and conservation sectors.<sup>9</sup> This is now beginning to percolate into development practice more generally.

## Recommendations

- Programme design should be informed by careful analysis focused on understanding social norms and values in the targeted region. Social scientists, with the help of local communities in the targeted areas, may be best positioned to do this analysis.
- Practitioners should focus on identifying how and to what extent social norms, values, and customary authority can be integrated at all stages of programme design, implementation, and monitoring.
- Practitioners should avoid imposing or assuming external values and norms when designing and implementing programmes in different contexts. Corruption, conservation, and responsible resource management can all have varying meanings attached to closely-held values, norms, and informal authority structures.
- Practitioners should examine any conservation approach to avoid doing harm through inaccurate assumptions about social norms and values. Some approaches, such as those focused on law enforcement, may further marginalise already disadvantaged groups and could force individuals or groups into difficult choices between closely-held values and the expectations of their positions.

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9. Minato, Curtis, and Allan 2010; Jones et al. 2008; Suškevičs et al. 2018; Alexander et al. 2016.

## Learn more

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