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## CORRUPTION AS A SOCIAL NORM IN NIGERIA: RETHINKING ACCOUNTABILITY IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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### Abstract

*Despite decades of institutional reforms, anti-corruption campaigns, and legal enforcement mechanisms, corruption remains deeply entrenched in Nigeria's public institutions. This persistence suggests that corruption cannot be adequately understood only as individual misconduct or institutional failure, but must also be examined as a socially embedded practice governed by shared expectations and informal rules. This article argues that in Nigeria, corruption has in many contexts evolved into a social norm an expected and routinized mode of interaction between citizens and public officials rather than an exceptional or deviant behavior. Drawing on social norms theory and institutional analysis, the paper conceptualizes corruption as a collective action problem sustained by mutual expectations, social pressures, and weak normative legitimacy of formal rules. It further demonstrates how this normative environment undermines conventional accountability mechanisms, transforming oversight institutions into performative or selectively applied instruments rather than effective constraints on power. The article then proposes a rethinking of accountability that goes beyond legalistic enforcement toward strategies aimed at norm change, including elite signaling, protection of integrity, narrative transformation, and the creation of institutional enclaves of ethical practice. By reframing corruption in Nigeria as a problem of social equilibrium rather than merely a problem of law-breaking, the paper contributes to debates in governance, political sociology, and development studies, and offers a more context-sensitive foundation for understanding both the persistence of corruption and the limits of conventional reform strategies.*

**Keywords:** Nigeria; Corruption; Social Norms; Accountability; Public Institutions; Governance; Institutional Failure; Political Culture; Collective Action

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the Problem

Corruption has long been identified as one of the most persistent obstacles to Nigeria's political development, economic growth, and institutional consolidation. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, successive governments have launched numerous anti-corruption initiatives, established specialized agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), and enacted a wide range of legal and administrative reforms. Yet, corruption continues to be widely perceived as pervasive across public institutions, shaping everyday interactions between citizens and the state (Transparency International, 2010; World Bank, 2000).

Mainstream policy and scholarly approaches typically explain corruption in Nigeria in terms of weak institutions, inadequate enforcement, rent-seeking behavior, or failures of political leadership (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; World Bank, 2000). From this perspective, the solution is assumed to lie in strengthening oversight mechanisms, increasing transparency, and imposing harsher sanctions. While these measures are normatively compelling and institutionally necessary, their limited impact over several decades raises a deeper analytical question: why does corruption persist even when formal rules, agencies, and enforcement frameworks are in place?

In everyday Nigerian social and administrative life, practices such as bribery, patronage, and nepotism are often described in ordinary language not as exceptional moral transgressions but as "how things work" or "how things are done." This observation suggests that corruption in many contexts may no longer function merely as a violation of rules, but as an informal system of coordination embedded in social expectations and survival strategies (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Smith, 2007). In such settings, formal institutions coexist with powerful informal norms that frequently override legal and ethical standards.

## 1.2 The Puzzle of Persistent Corruption

A growing body of scholarship argues that in highly corrupt societies, corruption is best understood not as a principal-agent problem—where a few bad officials violate otherwise sound rules—but as a collective action problem in which most actors expect others to behave corruptly and therefore see little reason to act differently (Persson, Rothstein, & Teorell, 2013). When this logic prevails, even individuals who personally disapprove of corruption may still participate in it because honesty appears irrational or self-destructive.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the Nigerian case. Citizens often report that access to basic public services, employment opportunities, or administrative decisions requires informal payments or personal connections. Public officials, in turn, frequently operate in environments where refusing to participate in corrupt networks may lead to professional marginalization, social isolation, or even personal risk. The result is a stable but dysfunctional equilibrium in which corruption is widely condemned in principle but widely practiced in reality (Smith, 2007).

## 1.3 Central Argument

This article argues that in Nigeria, corruption in many sectors has acquired the status of a social norm: a pattern of behavior that is not only widespread but also socially expected, informally

enforced, and embedded in everyday institutional routines. When corruption functions in this way, it cannot be effectively addressed through legal enforcement and institutional design alone. Conventional accountability mechanisms are built on the assumption that corruption is deviant behavior occurring at the margins of an otherwise rule-governed system. However, when corrupt practices are normatively integrated into the system itself, these mechanisms tend to become selective, performative, or politically instrumentalized.

The paper therefore proposes a conceptual shift: corruption in Nigeria should be analyzed not only as a problem of lawbreaking or institutional weakness, but as a problem of social norms and collective expectations. This shift has significant implications for how accountability, reform, and institutional change are understood and pursued.

## 1.4 Research Questions

Guided by this perspective, the paper addresses the following questions:

- i. How does corruption become socially normalized within Nigerian public institutions?
- ii. What happens to the meaning and functioning of accountability when corruption operates as a social norm?
- iii. What does a norm-sensitive approach to accountability and institutional reform imply for the Nigerian context?

# 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Defining Corruption Beyond Legalism

Corruption is most commonly defined as the abuse of public office for private gain (World Bank, 2000; Transparency International, 2010). This definition, while useful for policy, is fundamentally legalistic and presumes a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate uses of public authority. In contexts such as Nigeria, however, this distinction is often blurred in everyday practice by informal obligations, kinship expectations, patron-client relations, and survival strategies (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Smith, 2007).

Scholars have therefore argued that corruption should not be understood solely as a violation of formal rules, but also as a socially embedded practice whose meaning and acceptability are shaped by cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Harrison, 2006; Olivier de Sardan, 1999). From this perspective, corruption is not merely an individual moral failure or a technical governance problem, but part of a broader system of informal regulation that structures access to resources and opportunities.

This paper adopts a sociological and institutional understanding of corruption as a pattern of behavior that is sustained not only by incentives and opportunities, but also by shared expectations about "how the system works" (Smith, 2007; Persson et al., 2013). Such an approach makes it possible to explain why corruption can persist even when most actors publicly condemn it and even when formal laws are relatively clear.

## 2.2 Social Norms Theory

Social norms are commonly understood as informal rules that govern behavior and are sustained by shared expectations and social sanctions rather than by formal legal enforcement (Elster, 1989; Bicchieri, 2006). They differ from habits or conventions in that they carry a normative dimension: individuals follow them not

only because they are common, but because they believe others expect them to do so and may reward or punish them accordingly (Bicchieri, 2006).

A key distinction in social norms theory is between descriptive norms—beliefs about what most people actually do—and injunctive norms—beliefs about what most people approve or disapprove of (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). In many corrupt settings, these two types of norms may diverge: people may sincerely believe that corruption is wrong (injunctive norm) while also believing that “everyone does it” (descriptive norm). When the descriptive norm dominates behavior, corrupt practices can persist even in the presence of widespread moral condemnation (Persson et al., 2013).

Norms are particularly powerful in institutional environments where formal enforcement is weak, selective, or politicized. In such contexts, individuals often rely more on informal expectations and networks than on official rules to navigate everyday life (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). This insight is crucial for understanding how corruption can become stable and self-reinforcing within public institutions.

### 2.3 Corruption as a Normative System

Building on social norms theory, this paper conceptualizes systemic corruption not simply as the accumulation of many individual acts of wrongdoing, but as a normative system in its own right a set of informal rules that structures behavior, distributes rewards, and imposes sanctions (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Smith, 2007). In such a system, paying or demanding bribes, favoring kin or patrons, and diverting public resources may come to be seen as normal, expected, and even morally justified within certain social frameworks.

This does not mean that corruption is universally approved of. Rather, it means that participation in corrupt practices becomes a condition of effective functioning within the institution. Those who refuse to comply may be seen as naïve, disloyal, or even dangerous to the collective arrangement (Persson et al., 2013). Over time, this produces what can be described as a “corrupt equilibrium,” in which the costs of individual honesty are high and the benefits are uncertain, while the costs of participation are socially minimized (Rothstein, 2011).

In the Nigerian context, ethnographic and sociological studies have documented how public office is often interpreted as an opportunity—and sometimes an obligation—to provide for one’s family, community, or political network, even when this conflicts with formal rules of bureaucratic conduct (Smith, 2007; Joseph, 1987). Such moral economies do not simply coexist with corruption; they actively shape its meaning and social legitimacy.

### 2.4 Formal and Informal Institutions

Institutional theory distinguishes between formal institutions—laws, regulations, and official procedures—and informal institutions—socially shared rules, norms, and practices that are enforced outside officially sanctioned channels (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). In many developing and transitional states, including Nigeria, informal institutions often do not merely supplement formal ones but compete with and override them in practice (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

When informal institutions that tolerate or encourage corruption become dominant, formal accountability mechanisms may continue to exist on paper while losing much of their practical

effectiveness. Courts, audit agencies, and anti-corruption commissions may still operate, but their actions are often selective, politically constrained, or symbolically oriented rather than system-transforming (Harrison, 2006; Rothstein, 2011).

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Mainstream Approaches to Corruption and Accountability

The dominant literature on corruption has traditionally been shaped by economic and institutional perspectives that conceptualize corruption as a problem of incentives, monitoring, and enforcement. Within this framework, corruption is often analyzed through the principal–agent model, in which public officials (agents) misuse delegated authority because principals (citizens or political leaders) lack sufficient information or enforcement capacity to control them (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Klitgaard, 1988). The policy implication of this approach is clear: strengthen institutions, increase transparency, improve monitoring, and raise the costs of corrupt behavior through sanctions.

This logic has strongly influenced anti-corruption reforms in Nigeria and across the developing world. The creation of specialized agencies, the expansion of audit systems, and the adoption of legal and procedural reforms are all grounded in this institutionalist and deterrence-based understanding of the problem (World Bank, 2000; Transparency International, 2010). However, a growing number of scholars have observed that these reforms often produce disappointing results in contexts where corruption is systemic rather than exceptional (Persson et al., 2013; Rothstein, 2011).

One major limitation of the principal–agent model is that it assumes the existence of at least some actors—principals or enforcers—who are both willing and able to enforce the rules. In environments where corruption is widespread across political and bureaucratic hierarchies, this assumption becomes empirically and analytically problematic (Persson et al., 2013).

### 3.2 Corruption as a Collective Action and Systemic Problem

In response to these limitations, a second strand of literature has reframed corruption as a collective action problem rather than a simple principal–agent problem (Persson et al., 2013; Rothstein, 2011). From this perspective, the core issue is not that a few bad actors exploit weak controls, but that most actors expect others to behave corruptly and therefore see little reason to act honestly themselves.

When corruption is systemic, the costs of individual integrity are high and the probability that one person’s honesty will change the system is low. Under such conditions, even morally motivated individuals may rationally choose to participate in corrupt practices (Rothstein, 2011). This approach helps explain why societies can remain trapped in what is often described as a “bad equilibrium” or “social trap,” where everyone disapproves of corruption in principle but continues to reproduce it in practice (Persson et al., 2013).

This collective action perspective is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where public discourse frequently condemns corruption while everyday administrative practice often assumes its inevitability (Smith, 2007).

### 3.3 Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives

A third body of literature, largely sociological and anthropological, emphasizes the social embeddedness of corruption. Rather than treating corruption solely as a technical governance failure, these studies examine how corrupt practices are intertwined with kinship systems, patron–client networks, moral obligations, and local understandings of authority and reciprocity (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Blundo & de Sardan, 2006).

In the African context, and in Nigeria in particular, scholars have shown that the boundaries between public and private, legal and moral, official duty and social obligation are often blurred in everyday life (Joseph, 1987; Smith, 2007). The concept of prebendalism, for example, describes a system in which public offices are widely perceived as legitimate sources of personal and group benefit, to be distributed among one’s supporters and communities (Joseph, 1987).

These studies do not deny the damaging consequences of corruption, but they demonstrate that corrupt practices often operate within coherent moral and social logics that cannot be fully captured by purely legalistic or economic models (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Smith, 2007).

### 3.4 Nigerian Scholarship on Corruption and Governance

The Nigerian literature on corruption is extensive and spans political science, sociology, economics, and development studies. Many works document the scale, forms, and consequences of corruption in sectors such as public administration, oil and gas, security, and electoral politics (Achebe, 1983; Suberu, 2007; Smith, 2007). Others focus on the institutional weaknesses of the Nigerian state, including problems of state capture, elite predation, and the politicization of accountability institutions (Suberu, 2007; Harrison, 2006).

While this scholarship provides rich empirical and historical insight, much of it still implicitly treats corruption as a deviation from a normatively functional institutional order, rather than as a normatively organized system in its own right. Even when corruption is described as “endemic” or “systemic,” the analytical focus often remains on failures of leadership, enforcement, or political will.

### 3.5 Gaps in the Existing Literature and Contribution of This Study

Although the collective action and sociological literatures move beyond purely legalistic and principal–agent models, there remains a relative lack of sustained theoretical integration between corruption studies and social norms theory, especially in the Nigerian context. The specific question of what it means for corruption to function as a social norm—and how this condition transforms the meaning and operation of accountability—has not been sufficiently explored in a systematic way.

## 4. How Corruption Becomes a Social Norm in Nigeria

### 4.1 Historical and Structural Foundations

The normalization of corruption in Nigeria cannot be understood without reference to the historical and structural conditions under which the Nigerian state was formed and consolidated. Colonial administration established extractive and hierarchical governance structures that were weakly institutionalized and largely unaccountable to the local population, fostering a view of the state as an external and exploitable entity rather than a shared public

good (Ake, 1996; Mamdani, 1996). This legacy persisted after independence, as political competition became closely tied to control over state resources, and public office increasingly came to be seen as a primary route to wealth accumulation and social mobility (Joseph, 1987; Ake, 1996).

The discovery of oil and the subsequent emergence of a rentier political economy further intensified these dynamics. Because state revenue became heavily dependent on oil rents rather than taxation, the link between citizens and the state weakened, and political power became even more directly associated with access to distributable resources (Suberu, 2007; Watts, 2004). In such a context, struggles over state control naturally translated into struggles over access to rents, and the moral and institutional boundaries between public resources and private benefit became increasingly blurred.

These historical and structural conditions did not simply create opportunities for corruption; they helped to embed it within the logic of political and administrative life, making it appear normal, expected, and, in some cases, socially justified (Ake, 1996; Joseph, 1987).

### 4.2 Everyday Practices of Normalization

At the micro-level, corruption becomes normalized through everyday administrative and social practices. In many interactions between citizens and public officials, informal payments, personal connections, or intermediary “facilitators” are treated as routine requirements for accessing services that are formally guaranteed by law (Smith, 2007; Olivier de Sardan, 1999). Over time, these practices cease to be experienced as exceptional violations and instead become part of the taken-for-granted procedures of bureaucratic life.

Language plays a crucial role in this normalization process. Bribes are often euphemistically described as “something for the weekend,” “appreciation,” or “mobilization,” while acts of nepotism or favoritism are justified as fulfilling social obligations to family, kin, or community (Smith, 2007). Such linguistic reframing does not merely disguise corruption; it actively reshapes its moral meaning and makes participation appear socially intelligible and, in some contexts, morally defensible.

### 4.3 Social Rewards, Sanctions, and Network Pressures

Social norms are sustained not only by repetition but also by systems of reward and punishment. In normatively corrupt environments, those who comply with informal rules of exchange and favoritism are often rewarded with protection, promotion, or inclusion in powerful networks, while those who insist on strict rule-following may be marginalized, transferred, or informally punished (Persson et al., 2013; Smith, 2007).

In Nigeria, patron–client networks play a particularly important role in this process. These networks provide access to jobs, contracts, and political protection, but they also impose obligations of loyalty and resource sharing that frequently conflict with formal bureaucratic rules (Joseph, 1987; Suberu, 2007). Refusing to participate in corrupt exchanges may therefore be interpreted not simply as personal integrity, but as betrayal of one’s group or network.

Whistleblowers and reform-minded officials often face social stigma, professional isolation, or direct retaliation, which sends a powerful signal to others about the risks of deviating from established informal norms (Harrison, 2006; Persson et al., 2013).

Through these mechanisms, corruption is reproduced not only by individual choice but by collective social pressure.

#### **4.4 The Collective Action Trap and Norm Stabilization**

As corruption becomes more widespread and more deeply embedded, it generates a self-reinforcing collective action trap. Individuals come to believe that “everyone is doing it” and that refusing to participate will only result in personal loss without producing any meaningful change (Persson et al., 2013; Rothstein, 2011). This belief, whether fully accurate or not, is sufficient to sustain the system.

In such a setting, even strong moral condemnation of corruption at the level of public discourse coexists with routine participation in corrupt practices at the level of everyday action (Smith, 2007). The descriptive norm (what people believe others actually do) overwhelms the injunctive norm (what people believe ought to be done), and behavior adjusts accordingly (Cialdini et al., 1990).

The result is a stable but deeply dysfunctional social equilibrium in which corruption is simultaneously criticized, expected, and reproduced. Once this equilibrium is established, corruption is no longer experienced primarily as deviance but as a normal, if regrettable, feature of institutional life in Nigeria.

## **5. Accountability in a Normatively Corrupt System**

### **5.1 The Classical Accountability Model**

Conventional models of accountability in public administration are grounded in the assumption that corruption is a form of deviant behavior that occurs within an otherwise rule-governed institutional order. Accountability, in this framework, is expected to function through a combination of oversight institutions, legal enforcement, audits, and sanctions, all aimed at detecting and punishing violations of established rules (Schedler, 1999; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016).

In Nigeria, this model has informed the creation and reform of a wide range of institutions, including the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the Office of the Auditor-General, and various legislative oversight committees. On paper, these bodies are designed to ensure answerability and enforceability—the two core dimensions of accountability identified in the literature (Schedler, 1999).

This model implicitly assumes that accountability institutions themselves stand outside the corrupt system and possess both the autonomy and the normative legitimacy required to discipline wrongdoing. It also assumes that most actors prefer to comply with the rules and that sanctions will therefore have a significant deterrent effect.

### **5.2 Why Accountability Mechanisms Fail under Normalized Corruption**

When corruption operates as a social norm rather than as an exception, these assumptions no longer hold. In such contexts, accountability institutions are staffed by individuals who are themselves embedded in the same social networks, expectations, and informal obligations as the rest of the political and bureaucratic system (Persson et al., 2013; Harrison, 2006). As a result, enforcement is often selective, negotiated, or politically instrumentalized rather than impartial and systematic.

In Nigeria, anti-corruption campaigns have frequently been criticized for targeting political opponents while shielding allies, thereby transforming accountability into a tool of factional struggle rather than an impartial mechanism of institutional discipline (Suberu, 2007; Harrison, 2006). This selectivity further undermines the credibility of accountability institutions and reinforces public cynicism about the sincerity of reform efforts.

Moreover, when corrupt practices are widely expected, the social and professional costs of strict enforcement become extremely high. Officials who attempt to enforce rules consistently may face obstruction, isolation, or retaliation from colleagues and superiors who benefit from the existing system (Persson et al., 2013). Under such conditions, even well-designed institutions are likely to be internally neutralized.

### **5.3 Performative and Symbolic Accountability**

One of the most significant consequences of normalized corruption is the emergence of what can be described as performative or symbolic accountability. In this scenario, the formal rituals of investigation, prosecution, and reform continue to take place, but they function more as signals to the public and to international partners than as genuine attempts to transform the system (Harrison, 2006; Rothstein, 2011).

Nigeria’s repeated cycles of high-profile anti-corruption campaigns, commissions of inquiry, and reform announcements can be interpreted in this light. While some cases do lead to prosecutions or convictions, the overall structure of incentives and expectations often remains largely unchanged. Accountability becomes a spectacle rather than a systemic corrective mechanism.

This performative dimension is not necessarily the result of deliberate deception alone. It is also a structural outcome of trying to impose a rule-based accountability model on a system in which informal, norm-based rules remain dominant.

### **5.4 The Crisis of Legitimacy and Public Trust**

As accountability mechanisms repeatedly fail to produce consistent and credible results, they suffer a profound loss of legitimacy. Citizens begin to perceive oversight institutions not as guardians of the public interest but as arenas of political bargaining or instruments of elite competition (Suberu, 2007; Smith, 2007).

This loss of trust has important behavioral consequences. When people no longer believe that rules are enforced fairly or that honesty is rewarded, compliance becomes increasingly irrational from an individual perspective (Rothstein, 2011). In this way, the weakness of accountability mechanisms does not merely reflect the normalization of corruption; it actively contributes to its reproduction by reinforcing the expectation that “the system cannot be changed” and that one must therefore adapt to it.

Ultimately, in a normatively corrupt system such as Nigeria’s, accountability institutions do not simply fail to eliminate corruption—they are themselves reshaped by the very norms they are meant to combat.

## **6. Rethinking Accountability: A Norm-Based Approach**

### **6.1 From Rule Enforcement to Norm Transformation**

If corruption in Nigeria operates not merely as rule-breaking but as a socially embedded norm, then accountability strategies that rely exclusively on legal enforcement and institutional design are bound to have limited impact. While laws, courts, and anti-corruption

agencies remain necessary, they are insufficient in contexts where informal expectations and social pressures systematically undermine formal rules (Persson et al., 2013; Rothstein, 2011).

Social norms theory suggests that durable behavioral change requires a shift in shared expectations about what others do and what others consider acceptable (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990). This implies that accountability should be reconceptualized not only as a mechanism for punishing violations, but also as a strategy for reshaping the social meanings, expectations, and reputational incentives attached to public office and public service.

In the Nigerian context, this means moving beyond a narrow focus on catching and punishing offenders toward a broader effort to alter the social equilibrium that makes corruption appear normal and honesty appear naïve or self-destructive (Rothstein, 2011; Persson et al., 2013).

### **6.2 Elite Signaling and the Politics of Example**

One of the most powerful drivers of norm change is credible signaling by political and institutional elites. Because norms are sustained by expectations about what others—especially powerful others—will do, visible and consistent rule-abiding behavior at the top can have disproportionate symbolic and practical effects (Bicchieri, 2006; Rothstein, 2011).

In societies where corruption is systemic, citizens and lower-level officials often assume that elites are corrupt regardless of public rhetoric. When this belief is repeatedly confirmed by selective enforcement and impunity, the descriptive norm of corruption is further strengthened (Persson et al., 2013). Conversely, when elites are seen to subject themselves and their allies to the same rules as everyone else, this can begin—slowly and unevenly—to destabilize entrenched expectations.

Nigeria's experience suggests that rhetorical commitment to anti-corruption without consistent elite self-restraint tends to reinforce cynicism rather than change behavior (Harrison, 2006; Suberu, 2007). Norm-based accountability therefore requires not only institutions, but also credible, sustained example-setting at the highest levels of political and administrative authority.

### **6.3 Protecting and Rewarding Integrity**

In a normatively corrupt environment, one of the central problems is that integrity is often punished rather than rewarded. Officials who refuse to participate in corrupt networks may be isolated, sidelined, or professionally disadvantaged, while those who conform may be protected and promoted (Persson et al., 2013; Smith, 2007). Under such conditions, appeals to personal morality are unlikely to produce large-scale change.

A norm-based approach to accountability must therefore focus on altering the incentive and reputational structures surrounding honest behavior. This includes not only legal protections for whistleblowers and reform-minded officials, but also visible career rewards, public recognition, and institutional support for those who demonstrate integrity (Rothstein, 2011). The goal is to make honesty socially and professionally viable, and eventually socially expected.

Over time, as more actors observe that integrity is possible and not self-destructive, the descriptive norm that “everyone is corrupt” can begin to weaken (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990).

### **6.4 Narrative Change, Media, and Moral Reframing**

Norms are not sustained only by material incentives; they are also sustained by stories, symbols, and shared interpretations of reality. In Nigeria, corruption is often discussed in a language of inevitability—“this is how the system works”—which itself contributes to the reproduction of corrupt expectations (Smith, 2007).

A norm-based accountability strategy therefore requires deliberate efforts at narrative and moral reframing. Media, education, literature, religious institutions, and civil society all play a role in shaping what is seen as normal, admirable, shameful, or unacceptable (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Bicchieri, 2006). While such cultural change is slow and contested, it is central to any long-term transformation of deeply embedded practices.

The aim is not to deny the reality of corruption, but to challenge its taken-for-granted status and to reassert the idea that public office is, in fact, a public trust rather than a distributable resource (Joseph, 1987; Smith, 2007).

### **6.5 Institutional Islands of Integrity**

Finally, research on governance reform suggests that even in highly corrupt environments, it is sometimes possible to create “islands of integrity”—specific agencies, units, or sectors that operate according to different norms and standards (Rothstein, 2011). These pockets of relative effectiveness do not transform the entire system at once, but they can serve as proof that alternative ways of organizing public action are possible.

In Nigeria, such islands—where they emerge—can help weaken the belief that corruption is unavoidable and universal. By demonstrating that rule-based behavior can be both functional and professionally rewarding, they can contribute incrementally to broader norm change (Persson et al., 2013).

### **6.6 Limits and Risks of a Norm-Based Strategy**

A norm-based approach to accountability does not imply quick or easy solutions. Norms are deeply embedded in social structures, power relations, and material conditions, and they are often fiercely defended by those who benefit from them (Rothstein, 2011; Harrison, 2006). Moreover, efforts at norm change can be co-opted, politicized, or reduced to mere rhetoric if they are not backed by credible institutional and political commitment.

Nevertheless, without addressing the normative foundations of corruption, accountability reforms in Nigeria are likely to continue oscillating between symbolic campaigns and selective enforcement, leaving the underlying social equilibrium largely intact.

In this sense, rethinking accountability as a project of norm transformation rather than mere rule enforcement is not an alternative to institutional reform—it is a necessary condition for making such reform meaningful and sustainable.

## **7. Discussion**

### **7.1 Theoretical Implications**

The analysis developed in this paper suggests that corruption in Nigeria is more adequately understood as a stable social equilibrium than as a mere aggregation of individual acts of wrongdoing. This perspective aligns with and extends the collective action approach to corruption, which emphasizes that when most actors expect others to behave corruptly, the rational strategy is often to conform rather than to resist (Persson et al., 2013; Rothstein, 2011).

By integrating social norms theory into this framework, the paper highlights the normative dimension of this equilibrium: corruption persists not only because it is materially rewarding or weakly punished, but also because it is socially expected and informally enforced (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990). This helps explain why purely technical or legalistic reforms so often fail to produce sustained change in contexts such as Nigeria (Harrison, 2006).

Theoretically, this implies that corruption should be treated not only as a governance problem or a principal–agent problem, but also as a problem of social coordination and normative order. Such a reframing shifts attention from isolated institutional fixes to the deeper question of how social expectations, moral economies, and informal institutions interact with formal rules (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

### 7.2 Rethinking Reform and Policy Design

One important implication of this analysis is that the widespread practice of importing “best practice” institutional models from other contexts is unlikely to succeed unless it is accompanied by serious attention to local normative environments. Anti-corruption agencies, transparency mechanisms, and audit systems that function reasonably well in low-corruption settings may be quickly neutralized in environments where informal norms systematically undermine formal rules (Rothstein, 2011; Persson et al., 2013).

In Nigeria, repeated cycles of reform have often focused on creating new institutions or strengthening existing ones without fundamentally altering the social expectations that shape how these institutions are used in practice (Suberu, 2007; Harrison, 2006). The result is a pattern of institutional proliferation combined with limited behavioral change.

A norm-sensitive approach suggests that reform should be more explicitly sequenced and politically grounded. Rather than assuming that laws will automatically reshape behavior, policymakers need to consider how new rules will interact with existing informal institutions and what kinds of social and political coalitions are necessary to shift expectations over time (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Rothstein, 2011).

### 7.3 The Role of Power and Political Interests

It is also important to emphasize that norms do not exist in a political vacuum. They are closely intertwined with power relations and material interests. In Nigeria, as in many other contexts, powerful actors often benefit from the existing corrupt equilibrium and therefore have strong incentives to resist or co-opt reform efforts (Ake, 1996; Suberu, 2007).

This means that norm change is not simply a matter of persuasion, education, or moral appeal. It is also a political struggle over resources, authority, and the rules of the game. Without some degree of elite fragmentation, political competition, or pressure from below, efforts to transform deeply embedded norms are likely to remain symbolic or easily reversible (Harrison, 2006; Rothstein, 2011).

### 7.4 Implications for Future Research

The perspective developed in this paper points to several promising directions for future research. First, there is a need for more empirical studies of how corrupt norms are reproduced and occasionally disrupted in specific Nigerian institutions, sectors, and localities. Ethnographic and qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited to uncovering the everyday practices and meanings that sustain these norms (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Smith, 2007).

Second, comparative research could help identify the conditions under which norm change becomes possible, both within Nigeria and across different national contexts. Such studies would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of why some reforms gain traction while others fail (Rothstein, 2011; Persson et al., 2013).

Finally, closer dialogue between corruption studies, social norms theory, and institutional analysis could help build a more integrated theoretical framework for understanding not only why corruption persists, but also how large-scale behavioral and normative change might realistically occur over time.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the persistence of corruption in Nigeria cannot be adequately explained by reference to weak institutions, poor enforcement, or individual moral failure alone. Rather, in many sectors of Nigerian public life, corruption has become socially embedded as a norm—an expected and routinized way of navigating institutions and accessing resources. When corruption operates in this way, it constitutes not merely a pattern of rule-breaking but a stable, if deeply dysfunctional, social equilibrium sustained by shared expectations, informal obligations, and collective action dynamics (Persson et al., 2013; Rothstein, 2011; Smith, 2007).

By bringing social norms theory into dialogue with institutional and political economy approaches, the paper has shown why conventional accountability mechanisms designed on the assumption that corruption is deviant behavior—so often become selective, performative, or politically instrumentalized in the Nigerian context (Harrison, 2006; Suberu, 2007). In a normatively corrupt system, accountability institutions are not external correctives to the system; they are themselves shaped and constrained by the same social and political forces they are meant to regulate.

The paper has therefore proposed a rethinking of accountability that goes beyond rule enforcement and institutional proliferation toward a longer-term project of norm transformation. This includes credible elite example-setting, the protection and rewarding of integrity, narrative and moral reframing, and the creation of institutional islands of integrity as potential catalysts for broader change (Bicchieri, 2006; Rothstein, 2011).

This perspective does not deny the importance of laws, courts, or anti-corruption agencies. Rather, it suggests that without addressing the normative foundations of corruption, such instruments will continue to produce only limited and fragile results. Ultimately, the struggle against corruption in Nigeria is not only a technical or legal battle; it is a struggle over social expectations, moral legitimacy, and the meaning of public office itself. Sustainable reform, therefore, depends not only on changing rules, but on changing what is collectively understood to be normal, acceptable, and worthy of respect in public life.

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