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for Public Sector Managers**



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## The Rise of Systemic Corruption in Uganda: Strategic Interventions for Public Sector Managers

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper examined the rise of systemic corruption, the engagement in walks-against-corruption, the alternative carrot and stick as well as the observable challenges facing Uganda.

**Methods and design:** This study adopted a desk review of obtainable experiential and theoretical works on digital revolution in Uganda and other countries of the world. Desk research is essentially the gathering of information from available sources.

**Findings:** The paper indicates that in Uganda, reforms may be both home-grown and supported or initiated by donors and some have direct anti-corruption focus, others not. Further, the four pillars of public finance management approach to systemic corruption are: prevention, detection, deterrence, and behavior change. Also, walks-against-corruption face a number of challenges and or limitations including limited policy impact as WAC impact on policy reforms was limited, Deficiency of sustained momentum as their momentum was not sustained, and anti-corruption efforts fizzled out; and political will as the political will and implementation gaps hindered the walks-against-corruption's effectiveness

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** The results of this study suggest the need for enhanced public sector accountability and better value for money are significant for an effective governance system. To thwart corruption, using carrots, there must be protections and incentives for whistleblowers to come forward without fear of retaliation. Likewise, the government should focus on protecting anti-corruption activists, developing oversight capabilities to fight corruption among foreign partners, and partnering with governments to offer consistency and risk analysis across its foreign assistance programs.

**Key words:** *Systemic Corruption, Public Finance, System, WAC, Carrot, Stick*

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, corruption has become a significant problem for a vast number of countries across the world. Corruption is one of the main concerns not only in developing economies and economies in transition but also in developed countries. In contemporary global development discourse, corruption has prominently emerged as one of the greatest obstacles to the development and progress of most states (Salvatti et al. 2018). Much as corruption is a global challenge, its experience and effects are more severe in the developing world especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Otaluka, 2017).

In Uganda, despite the existence of various anti-corruption strategies, and finance management reforms, several scandals can be cited in recent times involving the loss of colossal sums of money in embezzlement, bribery, influence peddling and other underhand maneuvers. There is no generally accepted definition of corruption. Transparency International (2020) defines corruption as abuse of entrusted power for private gain. Also, the Uganda Anti-Corruption Act of 2009 describes corruption broadly as; the offering, giving, receiving or soliciting of anything of value to influence a public official in execution of his or her duties including bribery, abuse of office, diversion of public resources, embezzlement, causing financial loss, nepotism, influence peddling, false accounting and illicit enrichment, among others. Whilst the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2014) defines corruption as any form of misuse of institutional relations with public agencies or private companies, in order to gain personal advantage. It includes acts of bribery, embezzlement, nepotism or state capture. It is often associated with and reinforced by other illegal practices, such as bid rigging, fraud, bribe, embezzlement. Therefore, corruption appears to refer to abuse of entrusted power by government officials for private benefits or using to benefit one's party, class, tribe and family.

Corruption can manifest itself in several ways such as systemic Corruption, capitalism of friends: embezzlement and /or stealing state funds, extortion, payment facilitation., kickback, kleptocracy, lobbyism/campaign finance, patronage, tail corruption, regulatory capture, the search for rents, the capture of the state and soft corruption (Gouvêa Maciel & Santo, 2024; Rose, 2017). "Systematic corruption" embodies the idea that political actors manipulated the economic system to create economic rents that politicians could use to secure control of the government. In other words, politics corrupts economics. The classic cure for systematic corruption was balanced government. Systemic corruption as a stable equilibrium, where most individuals' actors expect others to act corruptly (Ray & Marriam, 2017). Systemic corruption goes beyond individual acts of bribery or fraud, and instead, it involves the manipulation and exploitation of social, economic, and political structures (Mriano, 2021). A distinguishing characteristic of systemic corruption is that the many parts of the government that are supposed to prevent corruption via budgeting, auditing, inspection, monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement also become corrupted. This makes the anti-corruption task much more difficult (Edward, 2024).

Systemic corruption often arises as a result of weaknesses in an organization or processes. A combination of factors giving rise to systemic corruption embrace:

- i) *Inadequate transparency and accountability* - When there is a lack of oversight and accountability mechanisms, individuals within systems are more likely to engage in corrupt practices without fear of repercussions (Vian, 2020; Transparency international, 2020).
- ii) *Weak legal frameworks* - Inadequate legislation and enforcement allow corruption to thrive, as corrupt individuals can exploit loopholes and evade punishment (Carothers, 2006).
- iii) *Power imbalances* - Unequal distribution of power and resources within a society can create an environment conducive to corruption. Those in positions of authority may abuse their power for personal gain (Godfroid, Borghoff, Plattfaut & Niehaves, 2024).
- iv) *Cultural, social norms and values* - Societies that tolerate or even normalize corrupt practices contribute to the perpetuation of systemic corruption. These norms may include favoritism, nepotism, and a lack of transparency (Hofstede, 2001).
- v) *Resistance to change* - At times within various organizations change is often taken with a negative perception and yet this may not be the case as can be seen in the adoption of E-governance within the public sector (Turgut, Michel, Rothenhöfer & Sonntag, 2016).
- vi) *Political interference* - Here we look at the various self-interests of political personalities that may not be in line with the various services that a programme may have been developed for so this may lead to systematic corruption within these government entities. This is also manifested in terms of elements of group dominance in formal organizations (Mwesigwa, 2022)
- vii) *Cross-border corruption* - Corruption itself is a cause of systematic corruption within various governmental entities and this has also led to rampant cases of systematic corruption within an organization (Pozgai-Alvarez & Huss, 2024; Gilinski, 2011).

As a result, systemic corruption manifests itself in various ways, such as: (i) Political corruption involving the abuse of power by politicians and government officials, including bribery, embezzlement, and nepotism. It undermines democratic processes and hinders the development of effective governance (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). (ii) Corporate corruption, which manifests within the business sector includes practices such as bribery, fraud, and money laundering. It distorts market competition, undermines economic growth, and harms consumer confidence (Bakan, 2004). (iii) Judicial corruption - when the judiciary is compromised by corruption, it erodes the rule of law and undermines public trust in the legal system. This can result in miscarriages of justice and hinder the protection of individual rights (Diamond, 2012). (iv) Social service corruption - systemic corruption can also affect social services, such as healthcare and education. Embezzlement of funds, bribery, and favoritism can deprive individuals of essential services and perpetuate inequality (Gray, 2013).

### *1.1 Consequences of Systemic Corruption*

Systemic corruption can be observed in both developed and developing countries, and it affects various sectors, including government, business, and social institutions. It creates environments where corrupt practices flourish to the detriment of public good and economic development. It undermines the principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability, eroding public trust and impeding social progress. The consequences of systemic corruption are far-reaching and detrimental to society as a whole: first, is economic impact given that systemic corruption hampers economic development by distorting markets, deterring foreign investment, and reducing public resources available for essential services (Kruger, 1974). Second, social inequality seeing that corruption exacerbates social inequalities by diverting resources away from those in need and perpetuating a system of privilege and disadvantage (Sen, 1999). Third, political instability owing to the view that when corruption becomes deeply ingrained within a system, it undermines political stability, erodes trust in government institutions, and can lead to social unrest (Montinola, 2002). Fourth, through loss of public trust, systemic corruption erodes public trust in institutions and can lead to a breakdown of social cohesion. This loss of trust can be difficult to rebuild and may hinder social progress (Putnam, 1993).

### *1.2 Statement of the problem*

The central attention of this paper is the dominant condition of corruption in Uganda, which is threatening the quality-of-service delivery in the country. There are signals that threats being experienced in Uganda's public sector is organizational in nature, that is, a number of public sector managers have previously engaged in one or different forms of corruption and therefore raises the magnitude of annual budgetary losses the country faces. This condition is a giant trial for the relevance of public financial reforms, and consequently, deserves immediate consideration. Owing to this challenge, this paper examines the rise of systemic corruption, the engagement in walks against corruption, the resort to carrot and stick as well as the observable challenges facing the country.

### *1.3 Objective of the paper*

The core research questions of this paper, which reflect areas of concern in this paper, are basically five, namely: (a) What public finance management reforms are available in the fight against corruption in Uganda? (b) What is the significance of public finance management reforms in reducing corruption? (c) What are the limitations to Public financial management reforms in fighting systemic corruption? (d) What is the success of the 'walks-against-corruption' in reducing the vice of corruption? (e) What is the appropriateness of applying the carrot and stick in the fight against corruption and what is the way forward?

### *1.4 Methodology*



The central method for this paper was a desk review of obtainable experiential and theoretical works on digital revolution in Uganda and other countries of the world. Desk research is essentially the gathering of information from available sources, for example, academic periodicals, the net, the media, diagnostic and experiential information and statistical journals. This is then proceeded by cross-referencing and organization of information. It has been recognized to be very helpful and can be used in the preliminary stage of a research venture as much of the straightforward evidence can effortlessly be put together and then applied as a guide in the research development.

## **2. Results and discussion**

### *2.1 Strategic interventions [public finance management reforms]*

In developing countries, such as Uganda, reforms may be both home-grown and supported or initiated by donors. Some have direct anti-corruption focus, others not. Public financial management reform (PFM); one example of such reform that can be used to adapt to the changes necessary for the development and improvement of an institution including fight against corruption (Fritz, Verhoefen & Avenia 2017). Public financial management reforms can be defined as those incremental processes, procedures and systems that an institution adopts and implements with the aim to radically transform the institution so that it achieves improved management and financial benefits (Miller, Hart & Hardley 2021, Hadden, 2017). The public finance management reforms in Uganda include: E-Governance Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS), Integrated Revenue Administrative System (IRAS), Health Management Information System (HMIS), Education Management Information System (EMIS), Learners Identification Number (LIN), Rationalization of Government Agencies and Public Expenditure (RAPEX), Public Finance Management Act of 2015, Whistleblowers Protection Act of 2010, Public Procurement and Disposal of public assets (PPDA) Act of 2003, and the Anti-Corruption Act of 2009.

The most noticed objectives of the Public Finance Management Reforms are four, namely: (i) To achieve overall fiscal discipline, in-country resource mobilization, allocation, and utilization, and more importantly to uphold efficiency and accountability in the handling of public resources; (ii) to address challenges and inefficiencies experienced within the financial management of the public sector; to assist the government in managing and improving its financial management for enhanced service delivery; (iii) To assist governments in managing risks and structuring public resources for sustainable management; to address and strengthen weaknesses and challenges that hamper the effective and efficient implementation of public financial management systems; (iv) To support manage and alleviate the challenges experienced in the management of its financial resources (Engela, 2024; Raudla, Kuusela & Ylönen, 2024; Goldfinch & Halligan, 2024).

### *2.2 Significance of public finance management reforms in reducing corruption*

- a) The punitive approach to anti-corruption characterized by crackdowns on corrupt practices through investigation, prosecution, and sanctions of corrupt individuals though sometimes successful, can also be highly dependent on the rule of law and well-functioning

institutions, which are commonly part of the same “systemic corruption” equation (Jing, Liang & Liu, 2024). Experience shows that in seeking to address the mismanagement of public funds, a punitive approach should be complemented by a political and institutional commitment to change systems and underlying attitudes.

- b) A public financial management approach to corruption, largely understood as a function of government accountability, transparency, and appropriate levels of discretion is well-positioned to advance anti-corruption efforts (Onana, Atangana Ondo, Manga Amoougou, Bitoto Ewowo & Zeh, 2024).
- c) Strengthening core PFM institutions can permeate the entire public sector, and the combined effects of measures such as enhanced internal controls and safeguards, internal accountability and oversight mechanisms, and social audits can encourage broad behavioral change.
- d) Importantly, the PFM approach can focus on both the supply and demand sides of governance: on the supply side, by strengthening PFM institutions, processes, and systems; on the demand side, by enhancing civil society’s capacity to engage and exert effective oversight (Umair, 2024).
- e) PMR reforms assist in addressing and strengthening sound financial management within public institutions by eliminating weaknesses and challenges that arise in the public sector.
- f) Public financial management reforms, thus, assist an institution in better promoting and managing its financial resources in an economic, efficient, and effective manner hence reducing corruption (Raudla, Kuusela & Ylönen, 2024).

### *2.3 Public Finance Management Reforms*

The four pillars of public finance management approach to systemic corruption are: prevention, detection, deterrence, and behavior change.

- a) *Prevention: Stopping corruption before it takes hold* - Public finance management processes and systems reduce undue discretion in collecting, allocating, and using public resources (Tran, Nguyen, Thi Bao Nhu & Thi Thu Hao, 2024). This is possible through the standardization, optimization, automation, and interoperability of processes related to national planning, budget formulation and execution, public procurement, tax collection, and customs management. By strengthening these systems, governments can reduce opportunities for corruption, and mitigating risks and vulnerability points.
- b) *Detection: Finding corruption fast* - Public finance management can also play a substantial role in detecting irregularities in the management of public funds through mechanisms such as internal and external audits, expenditure tracking, red flag systems, and external oversight by supreme audit institutions and civil society (Suzuki, 2024). New technologies that help automate and digitize control processes are revolutionizing audit functions, leading to continuous transaction auditing in real time with reliability that exceeds traditional manual audit practices. Citizens can also exert effective oversight, such as monitoring large

government infrastructure contracts through social audits, journalism, and media, which help expose and curb corruption.

- c) *Deterrence: Raising the Risk of Detection* - Promoting internal safeguards and controls in PFM systems while enhancing fiscal transparency and citizen oversight can help deter unethical behavior by increasing the risks of detection. Tackling Systemic Corruption through Public Financial Management can be by training for example, investigative journalists who can work with government counterparts to promote greater citizen engagement across the budget cycle (Schugurensky & Mook, 2024), improve compliance with access-to-information regulations, and develop user-friendly fiscal transparency mechanisms.
- d) *Behavioral Change: Spreading the word* - Prevention, detection, and deterrence mechanisms encourage new patterns of behavior among government officials and citizens by increasing the perception of risk, encouraging collaborative processes, and improving controls on unethical behavior. Public finance management programming and systems-strengthening efforts also contribute to behavioral change and can further ensure integrity by advancing the professionalization of PFM functions and promoting ethical standards, including transparency and accountability.

#### 2.4 Limitations to Public financial management reforms in fighting systemic corruption

- a) *Political interference* - A corruption case could have been reported and investigated by the anti-corruption agencies but as a result of orders from above by political leaders this leads to both dismissal of the cases as well as also promoting systemic corruption (Mendez, 2010).
- b) *Inadequate resources* - The presence of inadequate resources within organizations has made it difficult for them to implement and enforce some of these anti-corruption reforms within the organizations hence promoting systemic corruption.
- c) *Corruption in anti-corruption* - The high levels of corruption within the anti-corruption agencies themselves has also led to an increase in the cases of systemic corruption where by the whistleblowers are not protected and the person reported can use both money and political influence to bail themselves out (Mendez, 2011).
- d) *Poor internal controls* - Some organizations have poor internal controls as regards how to handle cases of corruption within the organization and this has led to exploitation of these poor control measures by the corrupt officials in an organization.
- e) *Lack of harsh punitive measures*. The punishments that are often given to the people found guilty of engaging in corruption are not harsh enough to stop the vice.
- f) *Bureaucracy* - As a result of bureaucracy there has been a delay as regards decision making in corruption cases because of the various departments that are involved in investigation of these cases (Klitgaard, 1988).



- g) Culture and poor morals - Corruption has become normal within some organizations leading to moral decay and challenges in fighting corruption in the organization (Galtung, 2006).

### *2.5 Using the 'walks-against-corruption' reduce the corruption vice in Uganda*

Walks-against-corruption (WAC) can be referred to as a form of peaceful protests and awareness campaigns that look at the aspects of raising awareness, building momentum, influencing policy, promoting accountability, empowering citizens and creating solidarity, for example, in 2015 there were was a WAC in Brazil that led to the impeachment of the then president Dilma Rousseff. Also, in the year 2011 in Uganda there was the organized walk to work protests that highlighted the economic hardships and corruption within the country at that time. We can arguably say that even if WAC alone may not be effective enough in addressing the issue of corruption, they can be credited for raising public awareness about corruption and its effects (Muhwezi,2020); serving as a tool for mobilizing citizens, civil society organizations and government agencies to take action against corruption (Kibirige,2020); and, promoting and increasing demand for accountability from the leaders and policymakers (Mugabe,2020).

Nonetheless, WAC face a number of challenges and or limitations including: (i) limited policy impact as WAC impact on policy reforms was limited; (ii) Deficiency of sustained momentum as WAC's momentum was not sustained, and anti-corruption efforts fizzled out; and (iii) political will as the political will and implementation gaps hindered the WAC's effectiveness (Kasozi,2020; Mwenda, 2020; Nakku,2020). As a consequence, scholars have proposed the following to be some of the possible future interventions (Kibirige,2020; Muhwezi,2020): (i) Sustained engagement and advocacy beyond one-off events; (ii) Effective policy reforms and implementation; and enhanced citizen participation and empowerment are essential for anti-corruption efforts.

### *2.6 Applying the carrot and stick in the fight against corruption*

Carrots and sticks are motivational approaches that involves offering a "carrot" (a reward or incentives for good behavior) and a "stick" (a negative consequence or sanction/punishment for poor behavior (Athina, 2024). The aspect of carrot and stick can be linked to Robert Klitgaard an American economist and an expert on corruption who applied this approach. In his approach he referred to the 'Carrot' as incentives and rewards that are given to people for honest behavior (positive reinforcement). Similarly, he also termed 'Stick' as penalties and punishments for corrupt or wrong behavior (negative reinforcement). The framework within the approach emphasized several aspects, namely; (a) Monitoring which consisted to the various ways in which organizations can be monitored to detect cases of corruption. (b) Incentives that are aligned with the offer of rewards for good or honest behavior. (c) Disincentives as penalties or punishments for those who engage in any form of corrupt behavior. (d) Accountability where by individuals are held accountable and responsible for their actions (Mwesigwa, 2022).

To better appreciate why both carrots and sticks are needed, it is useful to understand what happens in equilibrium if only punishment or only reward is used (Ochwo & Mwesigwa, 2021)): Without reward, due to bureaucracy, the bureaucrat can always find a sufficiently small bribe such that the losses during the process of reporting corruption are always higher than the requested bribe for those entrepreneurs that apply in equilibrium. Hence, the entrepreneur always prefers to pay the bribe, and corruption cannot be defeated. Also, without punishment, the corrupt will not be afraid of being caught and has a trade-off between collecting more small bribes and fewer larger bribes. In any case, for any finite reward, there exists a bribe level such that the entrepreneur agrees to pay the bribe with positive probability. Hence, corruption cannot be prevented without punishment

The proper combination of punishment and reward can defeat corruption even without using any exogenous corruption detection mechanisms. If punishment and reward are used together, they turn out to be very effective in fighting corruption. Incentives and sanctions make the decision to act corruptly unsound, when all costs and benefits associated with a corrupt act are viewed holistically.

If sanctions and/or incentives were attached to corrupt behavior, engaging in it would require a careful cost-benefit analysis. In most cases, the decision criterion would be; if the benefits exceed the costs, then take the action. Sanctions are thus helpful given that; (i) they help increase the costs of corruption while incentives help increase the value of benefits, (ii) Setting up carrots and sticks helps realign business incentives and support compliance efforts in a zone of weak governance. Therefore, to be dissuasive, sanctions need to be stronger than the benefits obtained from partaking in corrupt acts (meaning the punishment should far outweigh the crime) so that corruption becomes too much of a business risk and is thus unprofitable. To thwart corruption, using carrots, there must be protections and incentives for whistleblowers to come forward without fear of retaliation. Also, the government should focus on protecting anti-corruption activists, developing oversight capabilities to fight corruption among foreign partners, and partnering with governments to offer consistency and risk analysis across its foreign assistance programs

### **3. The Way forward**

Many scholars suggest that if development is to be achieved in any society, corruption has to be dealt with first but efforts to tackle corruption are often sensitive, politicized, or unsustainable, and explicit “anti-corruption efforts” frequently jeopardize political buy-in for reform. To address challenges in the fight against corruption, there is a need for efforts to develop a deliberate, comprehensive strategy for habituating virtue.

- a) There is need to build strong internal control systems, such as sanctions, that will ensure policies are fully implemented and fully respond to the public financial management processes and prescripts (see Mwesigwa, 2022).
- b) The democratic principles of checks and balances, separation of powers, transparency and accountability are possible mitigation strategies.

- c) Participatory anti-corruption approaches that include public service users are also important. Controls by civil society, media, and independent oversight and control bodies may play a crucial role, too.
- d) There is a need for new policies that will enforce accountability and consequences for non-compliance to statutory requirements, by administrative officials, without needing the authorization of political office bearers. Failure to do this will impact the current policies and reforms negatively.
- e) Take advantage of established accountability mechanism: Existing accountability mechanism such as Open Government Partnership Initiative are effective venues for collaboration between government and civil society to promote transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption innovations.
- f) Appropriately, frame anti-corruption initiatives - In sensitive environments, avoid explicit labeling of anti-corruption efforts that can jeopardize political buy-in and technical progress. Instead, emphasize the technical and operational impact of the activities in terms of accountability, transparency, efficiency, and integrity, and conceive the initiative as part of a broader thinking and working politically approach.
- g) Support both demand and supply side - Whenever possible, interventions should include government counterparts and civil society, which should lead to mutually reinforcing mechanisms; for example, launching fiscal transparency portals and training civil society groups to utilize the associated public data for monitoring and oversight.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Corruption appears to be deeply embedded in systemic, cultural, and political dynamics, challenging the efficacy of legal measures alone. Combating corruption may require a multifaceted approach that integrates prevention, legal enforcement, cultural shifts, political integrity, public engagement, and technological advancements. This scenario demands a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of corruption, fostering a culture where integrity and accountability are ingrained in the fabric of society.

#### **5. Recommendations**

From the conclusion, the study encourages the need for:

- a) Complement public finance management approaches be adopted by harmonizing people, processes, and technology initiatives, especially when attempting to change mindsets and entrenched behavior.
- b) Building such a value system would make government policing less cumbersome and provide a more supportive basis for other existing anti-corruption measures.
- c) Prioritize a public finance management work stream in anti-corruption strategies including in budget management, public procurement, treasury and accounting operations, internal

and external audit, tax administration, open data, and crosscutting technological innovation.

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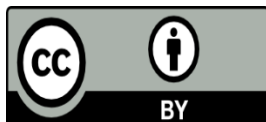
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