

The Role of Anti-Corruption Communications in Sustaining Integrity Reforms

An analysis of existing
research and approaches



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Executive Summary

Effective anti—corruption communications are essential to earn and maintain popular support for government integrity reforms, bolster the legitimacy of the government or mobilize the public behind reform measures. Gaining public buy—in and trust is particularly crucial in transition or ‘window of opportunity’ contexts when a new government needs to demonstrate its commitment and effectiveness and entrenched elites from the prior regime might seek to undermine anti—corruption initiatives.

However, the role of communications campaigns in fighting corruption and building trust during complex transition periods remains relatively under—researched. The academic and practitioner community have limited information as to how messaging campaigns can be used to advance anti—corruption policy and public engagement goals. This paper provides a brief overview of relevant literature, drawn from academic research and practitioner experience, and provides a set of evidence—based lessons. While more research and experimentation is needed to identify and measure effects, these insights can be used to inform reformist campaigns and help them adapt their efforts during transition moments.

Lessons for promising campaigns:

- 🌿 Target specific audiences, taking demographic and contextual information into account.
- 🌿 Avoid reinforcing the perception that corruption is pervasive, opting instead for a more positive framing – reinforcing injunctive norms of how people ought to behave or highlighting success stories – to promote hope, rather than cynicism.
- 🌿 Make use of data collected through audit reports and other existing accountability mechanisms.
- 🌿 Focus on issues that citizens care about, such as the impact on their socioeconomic wellbeing.
- 🌿 Build broad coalitions that can contribute to generating collective action against corruption by empowering individuals and groups to sanction or exclude those who break the rules.
- 🌿 Highlight examples of other citizens who are already changing their behaviors.
- 🌿 Mobilize grassroots activists or trusted influencers and personalities as allies in anti—corruption campaigning.
- 🌿 Take into account the broader information environment, including the media context and the ways in which anti—reformist actors might use disinformation or smear campaigns to undermine the integrity movement.
- 🌿 Use two—way and iterative engagements to inform policy development and build citizen trust, especially when the public can see how its input has informed and shaped the policy responses.

Introduction

The role of communications campaigns in combating corruption, particularly during moments of democratic opening (political *windows of opportunity*), remains under-researched. Though a trigger event (such as an anti-corruption protest or a corruption scandal) may provide the initial impetus for reform, a set of other conditions need to be met in order for reformers to be able to implement integrity measures, including political savvy and international support, as well as an understanding of the role narratives and communication plays in keeping the window open.¹

How we talk about corruption plays an important role in mobilizing and sustaining public opinion, which is crucial for anti-corruption reformers to create the conditions that make systemic change possible — and durable.

Effective communications are essential to earn and maintain popular support for government integrity reforms, while communicating progress and achievements can help bolster the legitimacy of the government, mobilize the public behind reform measures and generate support for enforcement efforts against politicians or other entrenched elites who might otherwise seek to undermine anti-corruption initiatives. During times of political change, the recognition of the importance of communications, as well as having the right expertise and tools can be a daunting task especially as competing priorities have to be addressed in a short period of time.

While public support for anti-corruption reforms and trust-building are key ingredients in political transition contexts, research into what works and what can be quickly deployed to assist reformers is lacking. Most available research into the effectiveness of communication campaigns is not tied to moments of democratic opening. It focuses on what might generate individual or collective action (initiatives that bring together individuals or groups in support of a common goal²) in response to corruption. Such studies offer important insights into what types of anti-corruption messaging might trigger different attitudes or actions from citizens (including the willingness to pay taxes, report corruption, participate in protests, hold others accountable or vote for non-corrupt candidates) but are still rather limited in scope and come with important caveats. Also relevant for

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More analysis is needed on the ways that anti-corruption communication campaigns interact with the broader social, political and governance factors, common in transition contexts, such as corruption legacies, weak state capacity (resulting in poor prevention mechanisms and weak enforcement), polarization, and disinformation.

¹ Florencia Guertzovich, María Soledad Gattoni, and Dave Algosó, "Seeing New Opportunities: How Global Actors Can Better Support Anticorruption Reformers" *Open Society Foundations*, November 2020, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/seeing-new-opportunities-how-global-actors-can-better-support-anticorruption-reformers>

² Ben Wheatland and Marie Chêne, "Barriers to Collective Action against Corruption" *U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre*, 2015, <https://www.u4.no/publications/barriers-to-collective-action-against-corruption>

transition contexts is discerning between anti—corruption campaigns that may have specific policy goals, such as a citizen—led campaign aimed at pressuring the government to adopt a certain reform, on the one hand, and those that aim to sensitize the public and elicit certain behaviors around corruption, on the other hand. The literature considering the effectiveness of the latter is not very encouraging.

More analysis is needed on the ways that anti—corruption communication campaigns interact with the broader social, political and governance factors, common in transition contexts, such as corruption legacies, weak state capacity (resulting in poor prevention mechanisms and weak enforcement), polarization, and disinformation. This is particularly important as there is also a risk that forces opposing the democratic opening will exert enough pressure and power to derail integrity reforms and cause the window to close. Also needed is knowledge and good practices on how reformist actors might use

The Republic of Moldova is a democratic bright spot; the December 2020 election of President Maia Sandu opened a window of opportunity for the promotion of integrity reforms and the dismantling of oligarchic networks. From the onset, the transition process faced a number of challenges, however, including the Covid—19 pandemic and the aftereffects of major — as yet unsolved — corruption scandals, such as the theft of one billion US dollars from three Moldovan banks. Sandu campaigned on an ambitious integrity—focused agenda and a pledge to restore citizen trust in government.

In 2022, NDI conducted a qualitative research project centered on a series of focus groups to gauge how citizens perceived the anti—corruption reform agenda and the government’s progress in implementing it, as well as the opportunities to enhance integrity reforms through communications. What insights do citizens offer for an effective anti—corruption communication campaign?

The research identified a moderate mismatch between the public’s and the government’s understandings of anti—corruption priorities, with the former focusing more on sectors where citizens have a direct experience of corruption and the latter emphasizing the need to prioritize oligarchs and high—level corruption. Citizens also proposed solutions for how to address corruption problems, such as increasing transparency and law enforcement, simplifying bureaucracy, empowering anti—corruption agencies or electing honest people for public office and tightening integrity controls for public servants. This shows that they have a good grasp on major integrity initiatives. Importantly, participants make a clear connection between corruption and a loss of public goods and services and see fighting corruption as a way to improve their lives. Citizens also emphasized the need for increased public awareness on corruption, underscoring the importance of more visible anti—corruption campaigns.

Responses varied based on demographic characteristics such as age or gender, which also points to the importance of having a deep understanding of the specific audiences that anti—corruption communication would engage. Effective communications could help close the perception and expectations gaps and engage with citizens’ concerns to ensure further public support for the reform agenda.

communication tools to build support, public trust and manage expectations when it comes to integrity reforms, which are often complex and lengthy. Even when the opposing forces are not strong enough to jeopardize the integrity reforms, the inability to effectively address citizen concerns and expectations can raise important obstacles.

This paper provides a brief overview of relevant literature and a set of potential lessons drawn from research. The literature review encompasses a variety of sources, from academic research to studies and reports by non—governmental organizations or international bodies, policy analyses and examples of ongoing or past campaigns. While the studies address anti—corruption communications and campaigns in general, useful lessons can be derived to serve in political transition or democratic opening contexts.

The Need to Build Public Support for Anti—Corruption Efforts

Anti—corruption efforts more generally seem to be shifting from more traditional institutional and rule of law approaches to more bottom up approaches that alter incentives and behavior. This has implications for understanding who the stakeholders of anti—corruption measures are and the best strategies to engage them. For instance, according to Khan, Andreoni and Roy (2019), anti—corruption strategies based on enforcement cannot work without broad support from economic and political agents that find it in their interest to adopt a “rule—following behavior”. They suggest that such strategies need a combination of policy and institutional changes, as well as organizational mobilization to create sufficient support for the implementation of the strategy. Additionally, anti—corruption strategies benefit from providing strong development outcomes, which create a virtuous circle of gaining more support for rule enforcement, which has provided for the beneficial outcomes in the first place.³

The authors argue that feasible and high—impact anti—corruption strategies have to rely on localized support for anti—corruption policies, which realign the interests of stakeholders in the specific sector. Solutions that may work in designing effective anti—corruption strategies, depending on the context of implementation (research and case studies from Bangladesh, Tanzania and Nigeria):

- ✿ Restructuring incentives so that most organizations in one sector would no longer need to engage in corruption;
- ✿ Developing policy combinations that enable compliance and facilitate enforcement;
- ✿ Constructing effective coalitions that become more powerful than those violating the norms and that can impose costs on them.⁴

Further building on new approaches, adepts of “social norms” theories claim that to disrupt the so—called corruption equilibrium, societies need “a signal of credible commitment to the population from the government to convince the majority of corrupt agents that most other agents are willing to change. The question is what these messages of credible commitment are, which types of policies can send them, and how those policies should be implemented from a strategic point of view.”⁵ This knowledge gap regarding what constitutes credible and persuasive messaging underscores the need for more empirical testing and more experimentation in different political contexts, particularly as recent transitions from closed or kleptocratic regimes to open, democratic governance have shown various degrees of

³ Mushtaq Khan, Antonio Andreoni, and Pallavi Roy, “Anti—Corruption in Adverse Contexts: Strategies for Improving Implementation” *ACE SOAS University of London*, September 2019. <https://ace.soas.ac.uk/publication/anti—corruption—in—adverse—contexts—strategies—for—improving—implementation/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bo Rothstein, “Fighting Systemic Corruption: The Indirect Strategy,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 3 2018: pp. 35—49, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_00501.

success.

Communications play an important role in transitions – particularly when the triggering events for the regime change are tied to corruption — in order to maintain momentum and citizen engagement, manage expectations and create an enabling environment for reformists. A particular challenge is deciding on, aligning and communicating priorities, as well as creating realistic expectations of how long reforms (or enforcement actions) are going to take and how much time changing the institutional structures and social norms would require. However, there is little understanding of what strategies work in such contexts.

Within the broader context of anti—corruption strategies, communication campaigns have been utilized to influence behaviors, inform the public about specific initiatives and policies, and increase buy—in (or build confidence) in government measures to foster/strengthen integrity in certain sectors. Communications campaigns can also be used to inform and evaluate policy — how do government anti—corruption initiatives impact different groups, are they making a difference? The most wide—spread tools have been anti—corruption awareness—raising or campaigns meant to dissuade corruption among the public, often focusing petty corruption, or broad and vague messaging on the negative impacts of corruption. Whatever the case, their effectiveness remains understudied and there is little evidence that such campaigns have any positive outcomes.

Overview of Anti—Corruption Messaging Research

While rigorous research on the effectiveness and impact of anti—corruption communications is limited, available studies point to three main categories of potential outcomes:

- 🌿 attitudes and behaviors towards corruption,
- 🌿 attitudes toward democracy, and
- 🌿 voting behavior.

In general, across these themes, available research shows mixed results and even the potential for adverse effects, highlighting the need for deeper understanding of the messages, messengers and methods of anti—corruption communication campaigns.

A set of studies examine the impact of anti—corruption communication campaigns on **attitudes regarding anti/corruption, including engaging in corrupt behavior (bribe paying), willingness to report corruption, or willingness to participate in anti—corruption movements or protests.**

Research (mainly survey experiments) conducted in Costa Rica⁶, Indonesia⁷, South Africa⁸, Papua New Guinea⁹ and Nigeria¹⁰ showed that exposure to anti—corruption campaigns does not generally make citizens more likely to see corruption as a solvable problem or more willing to report it. On the contrary, such campaigns can reinforce negative perceptions regarding the pervasiveness of corruption

⁶ Daniel W. Gingerich, et al., “Corruption as a Self—Fulfilling Prophecy: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Costa Rica” *Inter—American Development Bank*, February 2015, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/115508/1/IDB—WP—546.pdf>.

⁷ Caryn Peiffer, “Message Received? Experimental Findings on How Messages about Corruption Shape Perceptions,” *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 July 2018: pp. 1207—1215, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123418000108>.

⁸ Nils C. Kobis et al., “Social Norms of Corruption in the Field: Social Nudges on Posters Can Help to Reduce Bribery,” *Behavioural Public Policy*, 2019, pp. 1—28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2019.37>.

⁹ Caryn Peiffer and Grant Walton, “Overcoming Collective Action Problems through Anti—Corruption Messages,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, January 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3333475>.

¹⁰ Nic Cheeseman and Caryn Peiffer, “The Unintended Consequences of Anti—Corruption Messaging in Nigeria: Why Pessimists Are Always Disappointed”, *ACE SOAS University of London*, June 2020, <https://ace.soas.ac.uk/publication/unintended—consequences—of—anti—corruption—messaging—in—nigeria/>.

in society, induce more apathy or resignation or even encourage people to engage in corruption. Additionally, as the above—mentioned study in Indonesia shows, even campaigns highlighting successes in the government’s efforts to combat corruption can have negative effects. Only in Papua New Guinea, did the research show no negative effect: in some cases, “local themed messages” made respondents more likely to report corruption, but more commonly the effect of the campaigns was neutral.

Campaigns can reinforce negative perceptions regarding the pervasiveness of corruption in society, induce more apathy or resignation or even encourage people to engage in corruption.

One important — and potentially promising — line of research regards the type of norms that could be leveraged in anti—corruption strategies and campaigns and the way in which affecting people’s perceptions of such norms could impact the outcome of anti—corruption strategies. This builds on the distinction between “injunctive norms,” which is what most people approve of and expect others to follow versus the “descriptive norms” which is what they think people actually do. In highly corrupt contexts, the descriptive norm tends to be that everyone is engaging in corruption — that is, even when people think corruption is unacceptable, they don’t necessarily think other people hold the same belief. Research done in Mexico shows that when information campaigns emphasize that the vast majority of society finds corruption to be reprehensible, the message can help citizens see others as less corrupt, while also increasing interpersonal trust and decreasing the reported willingness to pay a bribe.¹¹ So rather than focusing on descriptive norms (corruption is bad), which tends to have a backfire effect, focusing on injunctive norms and changing how people perceive those can be more effective in anti—corruption campaigns.¹² While more research and experimentation is needed, creating the perception that other citizens hold the same beliefs or are already changing their behaviors represents a promising line of effort for anti—corruption campaigns.

Other studies exploring the role of behavioral factors (such as mental models, frames or beliefs about corruption) in perpetuating corruption, particularly petty corruption, indicate that exposing or raising awareness of corruption is not an effective strategy.¹³ While the evidence base presented is limited, Claudia Baez—Camargo argues that some interventions can show promise if they have clear messages, link corruption to the quality of public services, focus on incentives and showcase positive outcomes (such as successful corruption investigations).¹⁴

Researchers have also examined the interaction of messaging with individuals’ perception of norms or their own ability to act.¹⁵ An empirical test conducted in Nigeria showed that using a model behavior (in this case through films that portrayed people reporting corruption) and a nudge (individuals exposed to the “film treatment” received text messages with reminders that they can report corruption through text

¹¹ Mattias Agerberg, “Messaging about corruption: The power of social norms”, *Governance*, 2022, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gove.12633>.

¹² Yoshua Ryoo and WooJin Kim, “Using Descriptive and Injunctive Norms to Encourage COVID—19 Social Distancing and Vaccinations”, *Health Communication*, March 2021, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10410236.2021.1973702?casa_token=MxTtr5O7mKYAAAAA%3A1dlOxxZlrwePWooXGwqh5_L_ztT4YNZuEGVsvb76asMy9MJt6JPv5ESMPjqIvnTdcLC9hfmKyU4a&journalCode=hth20.

¹³ Claudia Baez Camargo, “Can a Behavioural Approach Help Fight Corruption?” *Basel Institute on Governance*, May 2017, https://edoc.unibas.ch/66324/1/20181029115507_5bd6e70b67471.pdf.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Graeme Blair, Rebecca Littman, and Elizabeth Levy Paluck, “Motivating the Adoption of New Community—Minded Behaviors: An Empirical Test in Nigeria,” *Science Advances* 5, no. 3 March 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau5175>.

messages) increased the level of corruption reporting.¹⁶ However, the study could not account for any potential long—term behavioral changes or for the motivations driving individuals reporting corruption. Other researchers also considered the cost—benefit calculations that individuals may make when deciding whether to engage with anti—corruption mechanisms (such as whistleblowing or joining an anti—corruption campaign), including the fear of consequences, the expectations around how that particular mechanism might work for the individual and its responsiveness — whether using the mechanism will make a difference.¹⁷ These individual considerations are also mediated and shaped by contextual factors (like the general public mood about corruption) and social circles or networks to which the individuals belong.¹⁸

A recent study conducted in Thailand focused on citizen action against corruption based on research into four anti—corruption personas that researchers tested through a national survey targeting six criteria: personal norms, chances of involvement in corruption, acceptance of power inequality, group adherence, avoidance of uncertainty, and masculinity.¹⁹ While findings were not available at the time of writing, the research points to the need for in—depth investigation of the audience before launching into any intervention. Adding the gender dimension could also open new avenues for research and new insights into creating more effective campaigns.

Ensuring that both individual characteristics and the underlying social norms or contextual factors, as well as reframing the way people think about the norms around corruption provide important clues for creating more impactful anti—corruption campaigns.

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A second body of research signals the — generally negative — associations that anti—corruption messaging triggers in **citizens' attitudes on democracy more broadly.**

Anti—corruption messaging seems to be doing more harm than good, according to Cheeseman and Peiffer, by amplifying the sense of powerlessness. A study conducted by the two researchers in Nigeria finds that making citizens aware of the corruption in their country via anti—corruption messaging actually creates “corruption fatigue”, as people perceive the problem is too big to be solved, and leads to a loss of confidence in democracy. Such campaigns might also

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¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jorge Florez et al., “From Grievance to Engagement: How Citizens Decide to Act against Corruption” *Global Integrity and Transparency International*, 2018, https://www.globalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/From-Grievance-to-Engagement-How-Citizens-Decide-to-Act-Against-Corruption_Reduced-1.pdf.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The Nation, “Chula Unveils ‘Marketing’ Strategy to Encourage Thais to Join Anti—Corruption Battle,” *The Nation Thailand*, January 2021, <https://www.nationthailand.com/tech/30401874>.

make it less likely that people would pay their taxes or vote for politicians running on an anti—corruption platform. These results are consistent across messaging that refers to the state or government, which leads the authors to conclude that the negative effects of anti—corruption messaging occur once corruption is perceived as pervasive and the state (and its political institutions) as the main culprit.²⁰ As mentioned above, part of the explanation may be that such campaigns draw attention to the “descriptive norm” – that many citizens engage in corruption – and therefore have the perverse effect of further entrenching negative perceptions. This conclusion highlights the complexity of the challenge: in contexts where citizens associate corruption with the government itself, reformists must simultaneously support both collective action and trust in the reform process, while also building the accountability feedback loops that give citizens a stake in the anti—corruption reform process.

Building on the previous conclusions, Cheeseman and Peiffer found in more recent research that, in fact, any anti—corruption campaigning — both negative and positive messaging (focusing on government successes) — may at best have no effect at all or at worst even backfire. Their research in Nigeria confirms that anti—corruption messaging has a negative effect on the “social contract” and citizens’ compliance, particularly when it comes to paying taxes.²¹ The authors raise another important challenge that anti—corruption activists are facing: since highlighting the state or government as the locus of corruption tends to have a negative effect, the solution would seem to be to avoid mentioning the government in anti—corruption campaigns, which, in turn, may seem disingenuous given the general perception that government (and its institutions or agents) is responsible for and guilty of corruption. That leaves an open question regarding what type of messaging can actually be used in high corruption environments where citizens are primed to believe that corruption is pervasive and perhaps impossible to uproot. Anti—corruption activists and policy makers will be left with the task of tuning in with citizens’ pre—established beliefs and norms and experimenting with campaigns that refrain from reinforcing negative beliefs while also being based on a clear—headed assessment of the problem.

The framing of anti—corruption messaging is a crucial element in planning for more effective interventions. A recent ethnographic study conducted in the US, Brazil and North Macedonia by Topos for the Open Society Foundation provides additional insights regarding attitudes to corruption and anti—corruption, as well as implications for citizens’ sentiment about

democracy more broadly.²² The conclusions of the study suggest that shifting from a focus on the harms of corruption and punitive approaches to specific and successful instruments that enhance government delivery of public goods could be successful in combating cynicism or powerlessness. Lessons learned about communication campaigns from this study include the need to center the conversation on successful solutions and focus on familiar institutions that are relatable/important for the public; emphasize solutions that prevent problems, rather than reinforcing them, and highlight benefits and focus on top—down changes, rather than everyday behaviors.

The framing of anti—corruption messaging is a crucial element in planning for more effective interventions.

²⁰ Nic Cheeseman and Caryn Peiffer, “Why Efforts to Fight Corruption Hurt Democracy: Lessons from a Survey Experiment in Nigeria,” *ACE SOAS University of London*, October, 2020, <https://ace.soas.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WP27-ACE-CorruptionDemocracy-201012.pdf>.

²¹ Nic Cheeseman and Caryn Peiffer, “Why efforts to fight corruption can undermine the social contract: Lessons from a survey experiment in Nigeria”, *Governance*, August 2022, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gove.12720>.

²² The Topos Partnership, “Hard Guardrails of Democracy,” Topos Partnership, *The Open Society Foundation*, September 2021, <https://www.topospartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Topos-Hard-Guardrails.pdf>.

The research into the role of injunctive norms could offer additional insights when assessing the impact of the positive framing campaigns.

Other organizations also emphasize the role of ‘*positive campaigning*’ (also known as ‘gain frames’) that highlights progress and showcases integrity stories and champions in order to replace cynicism with hope.²³ One such example is “Integrity Icons” by Global Integrity, a campaign active in eight countries which focuses on “*naming and faming*” honest civil servants through a broad-based nomination and selection system.²⁴ As outlined by one expert, anti-corruption communication is likely to be more effective to the extent that it can “make the victim a protagonist, pit her against a compelling and well-fleshed out antagonist, avoid universalism by setting the story in a specific context to which the audience can relate, and become a mentor to your audience.”²⁵ The research into the role of injunctive norms could offer additional insights when assessing the impact of the positive framing campaigns, but a lot more research is needed when it comes to the specific field of anti-corruption.

The third category of studies examining **whether information about corruption in politics – and the behavior of specific candidates – influences voting behavior during electoral periods** is less conclusive. Some studies prove the effectiveness of these campaigns, others show no significant difference. Ample anecdotal evidence also indicates that corrupt politicians do get elected. Trevor Incerti introduces the notion that the inconsistent results in research regarding the extent to which voters penalize corrupt politicians stem from the methodological differences (and biases) between field experiments and survey experiments. He also finds that these studies may not capture the complexity of real-world voting decisions.²⁶ In a similar vein, campaigns aiming to influence vote buying have a similarly limited impact as they generally don’t decrease the incidence of vote buying during elections. Some research shows that they may influence some perceived norms of behavior in as far as they break the relationship of reciprocity – voters will accept the bribe from a candidate (or multiple candidates) but won’t necessarily give their vote to the same candidate in return.²⁷

Important insights were revealed in a study from Brazil where audit reports on municipal use of federal funding were widely publicized with the media and the public, as well as submitted to prosecutors for investigations into potential corruption offenses. The audits were conducted in randomly selected municipalities in 2013 and researchers have studied their impact on voting behavior during the municipal elections of 2014. The study revealed a 17% decrease in the likelihood of reelection for mayors in whose municipalities two or more corruption violations were reported.²⁸ While the effect on incumbent

²³ Elaine Byrne, Anne-Katrin Arnold, and Fumiko Nagano, “Building Public Support Anti-Corruption Efforts,” *UNODC The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank Communication for Governance & Accountability Program (CommGAP)*, 2010, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/STAR/CorruptionWhitePaperpub31110screen.pdf>; Mark Buntaine, Paul Bukuluki, and Brigham Daniels, “Advancing Integrity – Uganda,” *ACE Global Integrity Anti-Corruption Evidence*, April 2021, <https://ace.globalintegrity.org/projects/positive/>; Nic Cheeseman and Caryn Peiffer, “Why Some Anti-Corruption Campaigns Make People More Likely to Pay a Bribe,” *The Conversation*, July 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-some-anti-corruption-campaigns-make-people-more-likely-to-pay-a-bribe-142307>; and Nils C. Köbis et al., “Who Doesn’t?—The Impact of Descriptive Norms on Corruption,” *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 6, June 29, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0131830>.

²⁴ *Integrity Icon*, April 6, 2021, <https://integrityicon.org/>.

²⁵ Jimmychalk, “Telling Corruption’s Story, or Why Is Corruption so Boring? (Part 2),” *GAB The Global Anticorruption Blog*, August 2017, <https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2017/08/04/telling-corruptions-story-or-why-is-corruption-so-boring-part-2/>.

²⁶ Trevor Incerti, “Corruption Information and Vote Share: A Meta-Analysis and Lessons for Experimental Design,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 3 May 2020: pp. 761–774, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s000305542000012x>.

²⁷ Christopher Blattman, Horacio Larreguy, Benjamin Marx, and Otis Reid, “Eat Widely, Vote Wisely? Lessons from a Campaign Against Vote Buying in Uganda,” *EGAP Brief* 65, September 16, 2019, <https://egap.org/resource/effects-of-a-campaign-against-vote-buying-in-uganda/>.

²⁸ Claudio Ferraz and Frederico Finan, “Exposing Corrupt Politicians: The Effects of Brazil’s Publicly Released Audits on Electoral Outcomes,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 2, 2008: pp. 703–745, <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2008.123.2.703>.

politicians was observed only in cases with multiple (two or more) corruption violations, more studies of this type could help shed light on the role that accountability institutions and their public outreach efforts play in stimulating citizen action against corruption. In general, more research and improved methodologies are needed to understand the impact of anti—corruption communications on voting behavior and electoral preferences, as well as other accountability tools that citizens might have.

In addition to the three broad categories, evidence from other reports, campaigns and analysis point to rather different types of findings that reinforce a more positive take on the effectiveness of anti—corruption campaigns.

Targeted campaigns, grassroots—led and focusing on a single advocacy goal seem to more effectively galvanize public support and achieve the desired outcome. Two such campaigns in Italy (started in 2013) and Spain (which began in 2011) relied on a communication strategy centered on a single communication tool: an official website that became the repository of all the materials produced in the framework of the mobilization, including factual information and the different meanings of corruption in both countries. Both campaigns also used data and social media (Facebook and Twitter) and to increase transparency regarding the political and economic elites. Both campaigns relied on crowdsourcing (collective action) and both achieved their intended goal.²⁹

Consistent with academic research finding that sectoral communities or networks are able to shift the balance in favor of more integrity, some projects show that social networks or groups, those individuals who hold authority within these groups³⁰ and the supportive structure created by connecting different “islands of integrity” which empower individuals to push back against corruption³¹ can also play an important (and positive) role in shaping attitudes to corruption and the desire to get involved.

Global experience indicates that integrity messages are more effective to the extent that they avoid technical or legalistic narratives and instead center on the *connections between integrity and citizens’ economic and social realities*.³² A study from 2013 conducted in Sweden and Moldova finds important connections between the economic conditions citizens find themselves in and their reactions to corruption, although this is context specific. In Moldova, for instance, when economic conditions are poor, incumbents are punished for corrupt behavior, though citizens tend to be more lenient (with incumbent corrupt politicians) if they get benefits in the economic sphere.³³

The Missing Links

Both research and practice still encounter important knowledge gaps. One aspect that existing research does not address is the extent to which anti—corruption campaigns are influenced by the general information environment in a country: availability and quality of sources of information, media independence, patterns of media consumption, widespread disinformation etc. Media plays an important part in anti—corruption efforts by informing the public and sparking debate — and has, in fact, been

²⁹ Alice Mattoni, “From Data Extraction to Data Leaking. Data—Activism in Italian and Spanish Anti—Corruption Campaigns,” *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*, November 2017, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/4mpx2>.

³⁰ Jorge Florez et al., “From Grievance to Engagement: How Citizens Decide to Act against Corruption” *Global Integrity and Transparency International*, 2018, <https://www.globalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/From-Grievance-to-Engagement-How-Citizens-Decide-to-Act-Against-Corruption-Reduced-1.pdf>; Cheyanne Scharbatke—Church and Diana Chigas, “Understanding Social Norms: A Reference Guide for Policy and Practice” *The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy Tufts University*, September 2019, https://sites.tufts.edu/ihs/files/2019/10/SN_CorruptionRefGuide_AUG2019-linked.MR_.pdf.

³¹ Cheyanne Scharbatke—Church, “Why Is Our Anti—Corruption Program Working?,” *CDA Collaborative*, March 2015, <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/blog/anti-corruption-program-working/>.

³² Abigail Bellows, “Bridging the Elite—Grassroots Divide among Anticorruption Activists,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/01/07/bridging-elite-grassroots-divide-among-anticorruption-activists-pub-80687>.

³³ Marko Klačnja and Joshua A. Tucker, “The Economy, Corruption, and the Vote: Evidence from Experiments in Sweden and Moldova,” *Electoral Studies* 32, no. 3, September 2013: pp. 536—543, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2013.05.007>.

the source of revelations regarding some of the largest international corruption networks and scandals (such as the Panama Papers or Pandora Papers).³⁴ Misinformation and disinformation campaigns have emerged as a particularly dangerous threat to democracy writ large and to anti—corruption efforts more specifically. Anti—corruption messaging is sometimes instrumentalized or manipulated by anti—democratic or populist forces during electoral campaigns.³⁵ Disinformation can also further entrench the priming effect of deeply held beliefs that corruption is widespread and everyone engages in it, thus undermining trust in reform efforts and anti—corruption actors.

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Anti—corruption policies, particularly those setting up special integrity commissions or specialized prosecutorial bodies and courts are also part of the information and communications environment. Anti—corruption agencies influence the information environment through deliberate formal and informal communications campaigns and strategies³⁶ but also through the way in which they implement their mandate and the actual outcomes of the investigations (such as whether high—level investigations are being pursued and successfully completed and whether their work is presented and perceived as being independent and fair). Weak and inadequate communications by anti—corruption agencies can undermine their credibility and is seen by some researchers as part of the reason why efforts to combat corruption fail.³⁷

Researchers split on whether anti—corruption agencies work on delivering results and, as noted above, there is a tendency to move away from approaches based on institutions and enforcement.³⁸ Similarly, debate is ongoing in terms of the appropriate level and type of information that should be shared with the public regarding ongoing corruption investigations, though the need for an *overall anti—corruption communications strategy* is clear. Investigations and reforms are connected in the public mind; setbacks in one arena jeopardize progress in another. Without a certain level of clarity and transparency — including on the investigation front — citizens’ confidence in the government’s resolve may diminish.³⁹ These agencies are also part of the context that needs to be taken into account when designing and implementing anti—corruption strategies and campaigns.

Understanding the role of gender norms and the role they play not only in corruption and anti—corruption norms, but also in designing strategies and awareness campaigns remains an important gap. Research regarding the role that women might play in reducing corruption is quite significant. Some literature indicates that societies with higher proportions of women in office could be less corrupt, but this relationship may be explained by socialization and women’s more limited access to corruption

34 UNODC, “Reporting on Corruption :A Resource Tool for Governments and Journalists” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, 2014, https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/2014/13—87497_Ebook.pdf.

35 Lica Porcile and Norman Eisen, “The Populist Paradox,” *Brookings* October 28, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order—from-chaos/2020/10/28/the-populist-paradox/>.

36 Jacob Otachi Orina, “A Study of Anti—Corruption Communication Planning by State Anti—Corruption Agencies in Kenya: A Case Study of Ethics and Anti—Corruption Commission” *University of Nairobi*, 2014, http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/75935/Orina_A%20study%20of%20anti—corruption%20communication%20planning%20by%20state%20anti—corruption%20agencies%20in%20Kenya:%20a%20case%20study%20of%20the%20ethics%20and%20anti—corruption%20commission.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1.

37 Elaine Byrne, Anne—Katrin Arnold , and Fumiko Nagano, “Building Public Support Anti—Corruption Efforts,” *UNODC The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank Communication for Governance & Accountability Program (CommGAP)*, 2010, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/StAR/CorruptionWhitePaperpub31110screen.pdf>.

38 Alina Mungiu—Pippidi, “The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop Control of Corruption”, *Cambridge University Press*, 2015.

39 Ruta Mrazauskaite, “GAB The Global Anticorruption Blog,” *GAB The Global Anticorruption Blog* , March 2019, <https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2019/03/15/lithuanias-judicial-scandal-shows-why-public-communication-matters-corruption-investigations/>.

opportunities.⁴⁰⁴¹ The literature on the different ways in which women experience corruption, the additional risks they are subjected to and the compounding effects of gender inequality and corruption is also growing.⁴² However, very little is known on whether anti—corruption messaging reaches men and women differently and whether it is likely to have a different impact on their behavior, such as whistleblowing or reporting if they are more likely to face corruption, its consequences or structures in which men hold the power of enforcement. More research in this regard would be welcome.

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Conclusions and Lessons for Anti—Corruption Campaigns

Rigorous research on public communications in support of anti—corruption reforms is limited and the evidence is not conclusive. This is even more starkly the case when it comes to anti—corruption windows of opportunity but such knowledge is crucial in order to ensure the effectiveness of integrity reforms, public support and trust and durable anti—corruption outcomes. In particular, understanding whether transitions come with shifts in social norms that might impact the way in which we need to talk about corruption and how citizens’ expectations or willingness to support or engage in integrity reforms might evolve as reformers define and start implementing their agenda would bring important insights for better anti—corruption messaging. In addition, as transitions require swift action, experimenting with communication campaigns with different specific goals — whether to ensure buy—in or bridge public perception gaps or to trigger a specific action (like reporting corruption or refraining from paying a bribe) — would add valuable knowledge about what tools reformists need and how they can be deployed more effectively.

Despite the limited evidence, as reviewed in this paper, studies on anti—corruption communication strategies more generally point to some potential lessons and avenues for future research and experimentation. These lessons can help guide reformers during transition moments in constructing and tailoring their messaging or, at a minimum, in avoiding the pitfalls of anti—corruption campaigns.

- ✿ To be effective, communication campaigns should be targeted to specific audiences, taking demographic and contextual information into account. They should also take into account potential individual cost—benefit calculations and what factors might incentivize citizens to take action against corruption.
- ✿ In order to craft policies and messages that respond to citizen demands, communications strategies should be grounded in data collected through public opinion research, focus groups, town halls and other forms of engagement.
- ✿ Campaigns should be crafted to avoid reinforcing the perception that corruption is pervasive and intractable. While the evidence is inconclusive, a promising area for further testing is whether

40 Aie—Rie Lee and Kerry Chávez, “Are Women More Averse to Corruption than Men? The Case of South Korea,” *Social Science Quarterly* 101, no. 2, January 2020: pp. 473—489, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12768>.

41 Monika Bauhr and Nicholas Charron, “Do Men and Women Perceive Corruption Differently? Gender Differences in Perception of Need and Greed Corruption,” *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 2 May 2020: pp. 92—102, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i2.2701>.

42 Angélica Fuentes Téllez, “The Link between Corruption and Gender Inequality: A Heavy Burden for Development and Democracy,” *Wilson Center*, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-link-between-corruption-and-gender-inequality-heavy-burden-for-development-and>

campaigns that emphasize a positive framing — highlighting success or existing achievements — work better to promote hope, rather than cynicism. Anti—corruption campaigns should make use of existing oversight mechanisms and public audit reports and data to enhance awareness and reflect the instances where anti—corruption strategies, actions or institutions have been effective (such as in the case of Brazil’s audit reports). Showcasing top—down enforcement or changes can also render positive results.

- ✿ Anti—corruption messaging is more likely to trigger collective action if it focuses on issues that citizens care about and are linked to local issues (such as by pointing out how local taxes are misused or how their wellbeing is affected).
- ✿ Building broad coalitions and focusing on aligning the incentives of actors who can act against corruption can contribute to more effective campaigns that empower individuals and groups to take action against corruption and sanction or exclude those who break the rules.
- ✿ Campaigns that focus on behavioral change approaches are more likely to create positive shifts if they create the perception that other citizens are already changing their behaviors (such as Agerberg’s research in Mexico seems to suggest).
- ✿ Anti—corruption messaging driven by grassroots activists or those that involve trusted influencers and personalities can be successful, especially if they are focused and targeted. The credibility of messengers plays an important role in the type of impact messages will have.
- ✿ Anti—corruption messaging needs to take into account the broader information environment, including the media context and the ways in which anti—reformist actors might use disinformation or smear campaigns. When anti—corruption institutions are engaging in public communications they should cooperate with the media (rather than reacting defensively) and engage with citizens through education campaigns.
- ✿ The use of communications strategies that are two—way and iterative can be used to inform policy development and build citizen trust. Given that perceptions are dynamic over time, these communications channels must be ongoing, to enable messaging that is iterative and adaptive to shifting contexts and opinions. Additionally, officials should showcase the ways in which public input has informed and shaped the policy responses.