

Summary: Anti-corruption programmes often include some type of communications or awareness raising component. Messaging on anti-corruption can also be integrated in other types of projects that do not have anti-corruption as their main objective. Recent studies – especially ones that apply experimental surveys or bribery games – give mixed evidence on the effectiveness of anti-corruption messaging, suggesting that messaging can sometimes have a negative effect on people's views and willingness to act on or engage in corruption. Studies looking into actually implemented anti-corruption campaigns provide slightly more positive results, especially when messaging is localised and targeted. This brief summarises the recent research and gives guidance on how anti-corruption messaging can be improved.

ANTI-CORRUPTION MESSAGING – RECENT EVIDENCE AND FINDINGS

Anti-corruption programmes often include some kind of communications or awareness raising component such as posters, billboards, radio and TV advertisements. These efforts are supported by the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC 2004, Article 13) that encourages states to “raise public awareness regarding the existence, causes and gravity of and the threat posed by corruption”.

Understanding and measuring how anti-corruption messaging influences people's perceptions or actions is challenging. While research on this topic is still limited, the evidence coming from recent studies that apply experimental and behavioural approaches, suggests that some anti-corruption communications can do more harm than good. Even positive messaging can backfire. For example, in Nigeria, a message highlighting government's success in addressing corruption increased participants' willingness to bribe. A similar message in Indonesia decreased people's pride in the government's anti-corruption efforts as well as their confidence that it is easy to get involved in the fight against corruption.¹

However, the few studies that have been conducted on actually implemented anti-corruption campaigns provide slightly more positive results. This may be because in experimental studies participants tend to be exposed to a single message about corruption only once before their views are surveyed, while in

Definition of corruption

Sida defines corruption as an abuse of trust, power or position for improper gain. Common forms of corruption are bribes, extortion, embezzlement, kickbacks, nepotism, fraud and breaches of trust. Bribes may be in money, in services or in the form of achieving undue influence. Another form of corruption which has along history but has only recently been made visible is sextortion, the abuse of entrusted power to obtain a sexual benefit or advantage.

practice, real-world anti-corruption communication tends to be a part of more comprehensive and longer-term efforts where messaging is only one element amongst many.

While evidence coming from recent studies is somewhat mixed, a few findings are emerging:

- **Drawing attention to the fact that corruption is widespread – or increasing – is not effective and might have negative effects.** This speaks to a collective action problem; people are more likely to engage in certain behaviours if they believe that others are doing so.² Anti-corruption messaging can also decrease voter turnout in elections and contribute to voter disenchantment.³
- **Other ‘negatively framed’ messages** – such as corruption is wrong or unethical – **are also mostly ineffective.** For example, in a study conducted in Papua New Guinea participants were exposed to a message about corruption being a moral issue that influential religious leaders oppose. This – and the message about corruption being illegal – did not have any effect on respondents' willingness to report corruption.⁴
- **Messages with a narrowed focus and target group may be more effective.** Especially localised framings that emphasise how corruption affects local people's lives seem to work better. For example, in the aforementioned study in Papua New Guinea, people indicated increased willingness to report corruption when they were exposed to anti-corruption messages that emphasised the impacts on their local kinship groups.⁵

1 Peiffer, 2018. Cheeseman and Peiffer, 2022. U4 Brief, 2023.

2 Cobrache 2019, Peiffer 2018, Manning 2009; Tankard and Paluck 2016.

3 Chong et al, 2011.

4 Peiffer and Walton, 2022. See also Cheeseman and Peiffer, 2022;

5 Peiffer and Walton, 2022. See also Baez-Camargo et al, 2022.

- **Positive information shock** has proven to be impactful. The messages that challenged a commonly held belief about the level of acceptance of corruption, have yielded positive results. For example, in Mexico participants were provided the results of a recent study, stating that a high proportion (94%) of Mexicans condemn corruption. Participants who saw the message, reported higher interpersonal trust, were less likely to view corruption as an integral part of Mexican culture, and showed lower willingness to bribe. A study in South Africa that tested a similar positive information shock approach (how less and less people in the state pay bribes) also found positive results.⁶
- **Gender effect:** Several studies on corruption suggest that men are more likely to bribe than women. Researchers from different social science fields have explored these gender differences without a strong consensus about why this is the case. One common theory focuses on different roles, opportunities and restrictions women and men have. While several anti-corruption messaging studies did not look at the gender effect, a study conducted in Costa Rica found that while exposure to anti-corruption messaging negatively affected both genders, the adverse effect was stronger on men than women.⁷
- **Pre-existing views:** The evidence on how people's pre-existing views influence their reactions to anti-corruption messaging is so far inconclusive.⁸

HOW TO IMPROVE ANTI-CORRUPTION MESSAGING

A recent working paper from the Basel Institute of Governance reviewed the current evidence and Camargo and Schönberg (2023) provide a good summary of ways in which anti-corruption communications can be improved. Based on the report and Sida's experiences we recommend that anti-corruption messaging should be:

1. **Contextualised and tailored**, taking into consideration the complex nature of the problem and how corruption affects a particular (local) context and/or a specific group of people. As mentioned, research shows that messaging that highlights the effects corruption can have on local citizens and community, may yield a positive response.
2. **Formulated** with the right vocabulary, striking an appropriate tone. The tone and framing can vary. For example, the positive information shock approach that challenges a prevalent preception of the level of corruption can be effective but can only be used in cases where such evidence exists. Also,

instead of only informing people about issues, messaging that encourages people to reflect and find more information themselves can be effective. Overall, messages need to be relevant and actionable.

3. **Delivered by a trusted source:** The message should come from a source that the target group considers as trustworthy. Different channels can be utilised to reach different audience groups. For example, in Tanzania, health workers received anti-bribery messaging from their professional association and hospital manager as well as their own peers, resulting in significantly decreased willingness to take bribes/gifts.
4. **Disseminated at the "right moment":** Anti-corruption communications efforts could also pay attention to timing and utilise windows of opportunities. Studies in behavioural science suggest that people might be more willing to change their beliefs when the environment or situation significantly changes.⁹ In case of anti-corruption, this could e.g. be after important elections.
5. **Combined** with other long-term efforts that focus on transparency, accountability, integrity, participation and efficiency. The Sida guidance on 'Corruption as a development obstacle' provides examples where anti-corruption work has been integrated into sectoral work including in health, education, water and sanitation, and natural resource management projects. For example, a health programme in Myanmar included, among other things, awareness raising and enforcement of the Code of Conduct for medical and administrative staff.¹⁰

In addition it is important to ensure that activities are integrated in the overall Theory of Change (ToC) of the project or separately developed in a specific ToC; monitored, evaluated and adjusted if not working effectively; coordinated and/or disseminated in collaboration with other actors. Coordination and dialogue with other actors (such as EU member states, multilateral agencies, NGOs, academia etc), is one of Sida's key approaches ("building blocks") for its anti-corruption work given the clear advantages that acting collaboratively can offer, and additional challenges that inconsistencies in donor approaches tend to generate. Coordination and dialogue should go beyond information sharing, to include joint analysis, funding and programming too.

⁶ Agerberg, 2021. See also Köbis et al, 2019. It is also worth noting that people tend to overestimate the prevalence of corruption: perceptions of pervasiveness of corruption are almost always higher than people's actual experiences with corruption (Camargo and Schönberg, 2023).

⁷ Corbacho et al, 2016.

⁸ In one study (Cheeseman and Peiffer, 2022) the messaging backfired most to those who already had pessimistic views on prevalence of corruption, while in another study (Agerberg, 2021) pessimistic people's views improved most.

⁹ Sharot et al, 2022. Perspectives on Psychological Science 18.1, 142–151.

¹⁰ Corruption as a development obstacle. Guidance for Sida's work. Sida, 2021.

Annex Table 1. Summary of recent key studies on anti-corruption messaging (continued on next page)

Study	Country	Approach / methods	Messaging tested	Key findings
Agerberg (2021) , Messaging about Corruption: the power of social norms <i>Governance</i> . 2022; 35, 929–950.	Mexico	2-stage survey experiment with over 3,900 participants, a treatment and a control group	(1) While corruption is widespread in Mexico, recent study finds out that over 94% of Mexicans condemn it This can be referred as “positive information shock”.	Results: positive Respondents became more positive towards other people’s attitudes on corruptions, reported higher interpersonal trust, were less likely view corruption as a basic part of Mexican culture, and showed lower willingness to bribe. Especially those with prior pessimistic perceptions, were affected by the message. ●
Baez-Camargo et al, (2022) . Using behavioural insights to reduce gift-giving in a Tanzanian public hospital: Findings from a mixed-methods evaluation. <i>Working Paper Nr. 40</i> . Basel Institute on Governance.	Tanzania	Mixed method study on real-world campaign in a health facility (includes posters, desk signs, staff champions, messaging from managers and professional association etc). Baseline and postline survey (over 1,300 people) conducted on both health workers and health facility users + in-depth interviews + social network survey	To health workers: (1) Reminder of professional ethics (2) Appealing to professional identity To users: (1) Emphasising that gift-giving is corruption and is forbidden in the health facility	Results: positive Posters and desk signs conveying anti-bribery messages decreased the intention to offer a bribe among users. However, data suggest this was more due to a change in attitudes towards gift-giving and beliefs about its consequences rather than a change in perceptions about the prevalence of gift-giving. Anti-bribery messages aimed at health workers, appealing to their professional ethics, decreased their willingness to receive (or solicit) gifts. Again, this was less about changes in attitudes and more about increased awareness that gift-giving is considered to be corruption. ●
Cheeseman and Peiffer (2022) , The Curse of Good Intentions: Why Anticorruption Messaging Can Encourage Bribery. <i>American Political Science Review</i> ; 2022, 116, 3, 1081–1095	Nigeria	Bribery game: participants were divided into 6 groups: 5 received each a different type of anti-corruption message, control group none. Afterwards, a half of the participants played a bribery game where they could win real money.	(1) Corruption is widespread in society (2) Religious leaders oppose corruption (3) State government has been successful in addressing corruption (4) Corruption affects local communities (“local fight”) (5) Corruption represents the theft of taxes and fees that ordinary citizens pay on a daily basis	Results: Mixed (mainly counterproductive and no-effect, positive to only one sub-group) ● The messages about widespread corruption, religious leaders and government success increased individuals’ willingness to bribe. Local fight and messaging on taxes had no effect. Pre-existing beliefs had influence: messages backfired most strongly with those who already had pessimistic views about the prevalence of corruption. For non-pessimists, four messages did not trigger a significant effect, and messaging on taxes had a positive effect.
Chong et al, 2011 Looking Beyond the Incumbent: The Effects of Exposing Corruption on Electoral Outcomes <i>NBER Working Paper No. 17679</i> . 2011	Mexico	Field experiment on local elections: different municipalities received different corruption and public expenditure information campaign (flyers) one week before the elections. After elections, 750 people were surveyed.	(1) How much the mayor had spent resources in a corrupt manner (2) How much mayor had spent in public services vs how much he had available to spent (3) How much of total resources the mayors had spent in poor areas	Results: mixed (some no-effect, some counterproductive, some positive) ● Information about overall spending and its allocations has no effect, information about corruption slightly depresses turnout. Exposure of high-level corruption affects both the incumbent and challengers’ parties negatively. Information on total resources spent on poor areas resulted in higher voting rate, increasing both incumbent and challengers’ support.
Corbacho et al. (2016) Corruption as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Costa Rica <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> , Vol. 60, No. 4, October 2016, Pp. 1077–1092	Costa Rica	Survey experiment, more than 4,000 respondents with 4 different groups: two groups received messaging about corruption, one about the lack of addressing deadly assaults, control group received no message.	(1) Increasing percentage of Costa Ricans who have personally witnessed an act of corruption (2) Negative information about the capacity of the Costa Rican state to deal with illicit behavior (3) The (lack of) productivity of the legal system in dealing with a particular crime: assault with a deadly weapon	Results: counterproductive ● Respondents exposed to a message that a growing number of Costa Ricans were practicing corruption were more likely to say they would be willing to bribe a police officer. Men were substantially more inclined to bribe than women, younger respondents more inclined to bribe than older respondents, and individuals with incomplete secondary school education more inclined to bribe than individuals with some exposure to college

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Falisse and Leszczynska (2022) Do Anti-Corruption Messages Improve Public Service Delivery? Insights from a Lab-in-the-Field Experiment in Burundi <i>The Journal of Development Studies</i> , 2022, Vol. 58, No. 1, 96–114	Burundi	Lab-in-the-Field experiment: 527 public servants played a game where they allocated rationed vouchers between anonymous citizens; some of these citizens attempted to bribe the public servants to obtain more vouchers than entitled. Civil servants were randomly assigned into three groups: two with different messages, one with no message.	(1) Good governance is the pillar of an equitable and uncorrupted society (2) A real public servant is equitable and incorruptible	Results: mixed (positive and no-effect) ● Public servants exposed to the professional identity message behaved in a more equitable manner than those not exposed to any message. None of the messages influenced the propensity to accept a bribe.
Köbis et al (2019) Social Norms of Corruption In The Field: Social Nudges On Posters Can Help To Reduce Bribery.	South Africa	Lab-in-the-field experiment: posters disseminated across a mid-size town in South Africa. Afterwards, over 300 participants attended a bribery game.	(1) Decreased prevalence of bribery / petty corruption (i.e. challenging prevalent perception)	Results: positive ● Exposure to posters reduced the perceived prevalence of bribery. It also reduced the engagement in bribery in a corruption game (the offering and accepting of bribes).
Peiffer (2018) , Message Received? Experimental Findings on How Messages about Corruption Shape Perceptions. <i>British Journal of Political Science</i> , 50(3), 1207-1215.	Indonesia	Survey experiment with 1,000 divided into 5 groups: 4 received different one-time message on corruption, control group none. Afterwards participants were surveyed.	(1) Prevalence of grand corruption in Indonesia (referring recent front-page scandals) (2) Widespread prevalence of local-level, petty corruption (3) Government success in attacking corruption (4) Citizen engagement / how to join the fight against corruption	Results: mixed (mainly counterproductive, partly no-effect) ● All four messages: • Increased the degree of worry about the impact of corruption on development. • Decreased pride in the government's anti-corruption efforts. • Decreased confidence in that it is easy to report and get involved in the fight against corruption. • Had no effect on perceptions about levels of corruption. The petty corruption message caused increased scepticism about the government's efforts to fight corruption.
Peiffer and Walton (2022) Getting the (Right) Message Across: How to Encourage Citizens to Report Corruption. <i>Development Policy Review</i> . P. 1-23.	Papua New Guinea	Survey experiment with over 1,500 participants who were exposed one-time message about the corruption: 4 treatment groups, each receiving a different message & photo, control group no messaging. Afterwards, participants were surveyed.	(1) Corruption is a moral issue, which influential religious leaders oppose (2) Corruption has impacts on local communities and should be fought locally (3) Corruption is illegal (4) Corruption is widely practised in society	Results: mixed (positive and no-effect) ● Respondents were more likely to be favourable about reporting corruption when they were exposed to anti-corruption messages that emphasized the impacts on their local kinship groups. Messages that emphasized that corruption is widespread, illegal or immoral did not affect respondents' willingness to do something about it, neither did they trigger pessimistic views towards reporting or resulted in respondents being unwilling to report corruption.