

Everyday corruption in Zambia: Understanding public perceptions and challenges

BBC Media Action Zambia, in collaboration with Diakonia and funded by the FCDO, conducted a study under the Deepening Democracy Facility (DDF) to examine perceptions and experiences of ‘everyday’ corruption among ordinary Zambians and public sector officials. The study focused on understanding the impact of small-scale corrupt practices—such as minor bribes—on public attitudes towards governance and the perceived effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts.

By gathering insights from both the general public and public officials, the research offers a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities in fostering a culture of transparency and accountability in Zambia. The DDF project, aims to strengthen democratic governance by enhancing civic engagement, promoting transparency, and combating corruption through targeted interventions.

The study

This study on ‘everyday corruption,’ part of DDF’s workstream on accountability, transparency, and anti-corruption, focused on routine, small-scale corrupt practices like minor bribes, unofficial fees, and nepotism—often seen as necessary to expedite services or avoid

penalties. The study was informed by a review of key literature, including reports from the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which noted Zambia’s improvement in the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and linked this progress to government initiatives like “*Project Recovery*,” the *Economic and Financial Crimes Court*, and the *Access to Information Act*. The review emphasized the role of Integrity Committees and efforts to strengthen legal frameworks, providing essential context for the study¹.

Research objectives

The study sought to explore public perceptions and experiences with everyday corruption in Zambia, examining how these practices are understood, accepted, and reported across different demographic groups, as well as assessing the effectiveness of current anti-corruption measures.

Research methodology

The study employed qualitative methods, including 11 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with community members and four In-depth Interviews (IDIs) with public officials, across Lusaka, Kitwe, Kabwe, and Mazabuka. These areas were chosen for their economic, political, and social relevance to the DDF project. Participants, included young people, older men and women, district commissioners, a police commanding officer, and an academic leader. These participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives on corruption, its causes, and reporting practices.

¹ Anti-Corruption Commission (2023), Report of evaluation of the Integrity Committee Programme, Zambia

Key findings

Widespread perception of corruption:

Corruption is perceived as pervasive across various sectors, including the police, education, health services, government services, and employment. Participants shared firsthand experiences of corruption, such as bribery to expedite services or secure employment.

Good vs. bad corruption: A significant finding of the study was the distinction made by participants between **"good"** and **"bad" corruption**. **"Good" corruption** is perceived as justifiable when it results in personal gain or facilitates particular outcomes, such as obtaining a job or ensuring faster service. For instance, a participant remarked,

"Paying a bribe to get a job is seen as 'good' because it helps secure employment in a tough market."

FGD with young people in Lusaka

In contrast, **"bad" corruption** is seen as detrimental, especially when it involves large sums of money, affects many people, or leads to significant financial loss for the public. One participant noted, "

When corruption involves big money and affects many, it's definitely 'bad' because it hurts everyone."

FGD with young people in Lusaka

This dichotomy reflects a nuanced understanding of corruption, where the moral or ethical implications are weighed against the perceived benefits. While the term "good" corruption may seem contradictory—since corruption is inherently negative—participants often used these terms to rationalize behaviours that, while corrupt, were seen as necessary or beneficial to the ordinary man in the street.

*"Corruption is everywhere—you have to pay someone just to get a service that should be free. It's become so normal that if you don't do it, you get nothing done. Everyone expects it, and if you refuse, you're the one who suffers the delays or worse..."*FGD participant in Kabwe

Causes of corruption: The study identified various causes of corruption at the individual and institutional levels:

At the individual level:

Desperation and economic stress: High poverty levels and unemployment drive individuals to engage in petty corruption to secure jobs or ensure financial stability.

Selfishness and personal gain: Some individuals engage in corrupt practices for personal enrichment, taking advantage of their positions. For instance, a government official might demand kickbacks for approving contracts or fast-tracking services, using their authority to benefit financially at the expense of fairness and public trust.

Skills gap: Lack of qualifications or necessary skills leads individuals to use corrupt means to obtain jobs or other opportunities.

At the institutional level:

Ineffective government systems: Weak governance structures and lack of transparency in government processes create opportunities for corruption.

Bureaucracy and inefficiency: Complex and lengthy bureaucratic processes incentivize individuals to use corrupt practices to expedite services.

Leadership failures: Poor leadership and lack of accountability at higher levels contribute to a culture of corruption, with leaders setting negative precedents.

Acceptance of corruption: Corruption has become normalized in many communities, with individuals often resorting to corrupt practices to navigate bureaucratic inefficiencies or ensure access to essential services. This normalization is heavily influenced by cultural norms, such as the expectation to **"grease the wheels"** to get things done, especially when others are seen doing the same. People often believe that going

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against these norms—by refusing to pay bribes or follow corrupt practices—would result in significant delay and denial of services. Economic pressures also play a critical role, as individuals in financially strained situations may feel they have no choice but to participate in corruption to achieve their needs.

Barriers to reporting corruption: Fear of retaliation, lack of knowledge about reporting channels, and distrust in authorities were identified as key barriers to reporting corruption. Awareness of formal reporting mechanisms, such as the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), varied across demographics, with women, particularly in rural areas, being less aware. Additionally, many individuals who engage in corrupt practices themselves may be reluctant to report others, as doing so could expose their involvement. As one participant noted,

"People won't report corruption because they're also part of it—they benefit from the same system." FGD with young people in Kitwe

Perceived effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts: While some participants acknowledged a reduction in corruption such as minor bribes in public service delivery, due to recent government measures, others remained sceptical about the overall effectiveness of these efforts. They noted ongoing issues with enforcement and accountability, particularly in tackling larger, more systemic forms of corruption.

Key implications

This study has several critical implications for anti-corruption efforts in Zambia:

Normalization of corruption: The widespread acceptance of everyday corruption to navigate bureaucratic inefficiencies presents a significant barrier to combating corruption. This normalization reflects a deep-seated social norm, indicating a cultural challenge that requires not just legal reforms but also

comprehensive public education to shift societal attitudes towards corruption.

Targeted anti-corruption strategies: The distinction between "good" and "bad" corruption highlighted by participants suggests that anti-corruption efforts must be tailored to address both large-scale corruption and the more pervasive small-scale corrupt practices. Addressing "good" corruption is particularly challenging, as it often arises from situations where individuals feel they have no other choice, such as when navigating bureaucratic hurdles or securing basic needs. Therefore, more thought needs to be given to understanding and addressing the underlying causes of "good" corruption. One approach could be to tackle "bad" corruption within institutions openly and boldly, ensuring that citizens see tangible improvements and have confidence in the system.

By creating alternative pathways, such as through work opportunities, training, or improved services, the need for "good" corruption may diminish, leading to a natural reduction in these practices as people see viable, legitimate options available to them.

Strengthening reporting mechanisms: The study highlights the need to improve public awareness and trust in reporting mechanisms. Fear of retaliation, coupled with a lack of knowledge about where and how to report corruption, hampers the effectiveness of current anti-corruption measures. Enhancing the accessibility and perceived reliability of reporting channels, such as the Anti-Corruption Commission's upcoming online whistleblowing system, is vital.

Legal and institutional reforms: The findings indicate a pressing need for continued legal and institutional reforms, such as those underway with the review of the Anti-Corruption Act and the establishment of specialized courts for financial crimes. These reforms should be complemented by stricter enforcement of existing laws and the introduction of stiffer

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penalties for corrupt practices to deter future offenses.

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Community engagement and empowerment:

Community acceptance of corruption, often seen as necessary to navigate challenges, needs to be shifted. Empowering local leaders and community watchdogs can foster grassroots anti-corruption efforts. To reduce reliance on *"good corruption,"* it's crucial to highlight the long-term benefits of integrity, such as fairer resource distribution, better public services, and increased trust in institutions. Integrating these messages into community development programs can help demonstrate that rejecting corruption leads to more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Private sector involvement: The involvement of the private sector in developing and implementing anti-corruption mechanisms is crucial for creating a fair business environment. Encouraging private enterprises to adopt and enforce anti-bribery policies will not only improve business integrity but also contribute to broader societal change.

Monitoring and evaluation: Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of anti-corruption initiatives are essential to ensure their effectiveness. Regular assessments, like the CPI, should be used to track progress, identify gaps, and refine strategies as needed. This iterative process will help maintain momentum in the fight against corruption.

The Everyday Corruption Study highlights the need for continued efforts to address both the systemic and cultural factors that perpetuate corruption in Zambia. The findings will inform future anti-corruption initiatives under the DDF project, with a focus on improving transparency, accountability, and public engagement in the fight against corruption.

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