



Message from the NSTF Executive Director

Is there a cure for viral corruption?

Coronavirus or COVID-19. These are the terms that now fill us with dread, even despair or anger. The other word that starts with the same letter – corruption – has been filling (most of) us with dread, despair and anger for many years, and continues to do so now. One waits. But there seems to be no treatment, and certainly no vaccine. Even when nurses and doctors are taken ill, and thus taken away from the essential services they are performing, and even as they strike to be provided with life-saving personal protective equipment (PPEs), the corrupt are making deals to syphon off money from the contracts for provision of such PPEs. Looking back at data collected a few years ago, and articles written, I am astounded to realise that the corruption problems South Africa had more than ten years ago are still with us, and unresolved.

We know, more or less, why we are in this situation. The people in power enrich themselves at the cost of the public, including the needy. The saying: *All power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely* still holds true. (Attributed to John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, English Catholic historian, politician, and writer, late 19th century). Why is this? Is corruption simply an issue of conscience, morality and ethics? Or are there other factors at play? What recent research can cast some light on this ‘pandemic’?

Transparency International defines corruption as the “abuse of entrusted power for private gains” (2010). My impression is that corruption is a relatively recent topic of research (although this is of course not a comprehensive search), and long overdue.

South Africa

South Africa received a score of 43 (out of 100) in the 2017 [Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index](#), ranking 71 out of 180 countries. SA’s position was steadily slipping downwards. Countries with scores below 50 have a serious corruption problem.

We have a “robust anti-corruption framework, but laws are inadequately enforced and accountability in public sectors such as healthcare remain low” ([Wikipedia](#)). That was the case three years ago, and it is still the case.

Afrobarometer

In 2015, [Afrobarometer](#) did a survey to determine critical thinking regarding the performance of Africa’s elected leaders.

One of the reported outcomes was the extent to which South Africans were increasingly dissatisfied with their elected leaders’ performance (Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 65, by Rorisang Lekalake).

SA’s citizens had some of the most critical thinkers in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, as shown by their ratings of President Jacob Zuma (SA president at the time), members of parliament (MPs) and local government councillors. At that time, the majority of South Africans disapproved of the performance of the president (62%), MPs (54%) and local councillors (61%). Disapproval ratings in South Africa were significantly above the regional average for local government councillors (by 23 percentage points) and the presidents of the countries (22 points).

South Africans' disapproval of various categories of elected leaders has followed more or less the same trend since 2000. There were significant increases in disapproval of the president and MPs between 2011 and 2015. Disapproval of the nine premiers was significantly lower (at 34%, on average since 2000) and has been relatively stable since 2008. Since 2006, citizens increasingly believed that voters should be responsible for ensuring that leaders do their jobs.

Levels of approval for the president, MPs and local government are similar across age groups and genders. Evaluations of overall government performance had declined significantly in e.g. management of the economy, crime/security, and the fight against corruption. Approval of President Zuma's performance had almost halved between 2011 (64%) and 2015 (36%) and in 2015 was well below the presidential average since 2000 (55%). This is the first time that a majority of South Africans had expressed outright disapproval of a president's performance (62%) since the initial Afrobarometer survey in 2000.

(The Afrobarometer team is led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and Plus 94 Research. 2 400 adult South Africans were interviewed in August-September 2015).

Corruption Watch

A 2014 article published by Corruption Watch is entitled: [Why is corruption getting worse in South Africa?](#)

South Africans thought in 2014 that public sector corruption was getting worse. Transparency International's (TI) 2013 global [Corruption Perception Index](#) (CPI) shows that SA had dropped 34 places since 2001, with most of the damage done since 2009. In 2015, SA was ranked at number 72 out of 175 countries and heading downwards.

The Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) annual [South African Social Attitudes Survey](#) (SASAS) showed that the proportion of people who thought that tackling corruption should be a national priority almost doubling, from 14% to 26% in the five-year period between 2006 and 2011.

The public is aware that politicians and public officials divert public funds away from service delivery "into their back pockets". (2013 Afrobarometer report, [Governments falter in fight to curb corruption](#)). In 2011 the former head of the Special Investigation Unit, Willie Hofmeyer, reported before parliament that between R25 billion and R30 billion was lost to the government procurement budget each year due to this type of fraud.

The "heart of the problem lies in the lack of accountability for maladministration and corruption". Corruption Watch states that it all starts with the president – while there are various efforts by the government to tackle corruption, "these actions were countered by the continuing impunity on the part of those who were politically and financially powerful". This is unfortunately still the case.

Social psychology

A doctoral dissertation by Nils Christopher Köbis: ***The social psychology of corruption*** explores the causes of corruption from the social psychological point of view. He starts with: "Corruption occurs daily around the world – causing immense damages". He cites a 2014 Avaaz survey where 116 000 people in 194 countries were asked what the most significant obstacle was to the improvement of global well-being. On top of the list was 'fighting political corruption'; 37% of respondents listed this as the primary societal problem.

Köbis says there was an urgent demand for scientific investigation into the causes and consequences of corruption. Corruption research had neglected the role of psychological processes. Unethical behaviour had been studied through behavioural research, indicating the "immense importance" of psychological factors.

There is however, research in economics that sheds light on corruption, due to the disastrous effect that corruption has on economies. The theoretical and methodological toolkit of such research could help to study crucial questions from a social psychological point of view.

Köbis asks, “What type of social norm impacts corruption more strongly: is it the moral evaluation (injunctive norms) or the perception of what everybody else does (descriptive norms)?” and do “severe forms of corruption come about gradually, resembling a ‘slippery slope’ process or whether they arise abruptly, rather resembling a ‘steep cliff’?” Many attempts to curb corruption through harsher punishment regimes have failed.

The author looks at how an individual perceives the social environment, and societal norms. Part of the dissertation presents “empirical data on the intricate social dynamics of corrupt decision-making”. He discusses how the presence of another person could influence ethical decision making, and then the psychological dynamics among “multiple corrupt agents”. Finally, he writes about how severe corruption emerges, and compares gradual and abrupt processes.

The ANC

An article by [Ebrahim Fakir](#) of 5 December 2013 in Daily Maverick calls attention to a telling remark by the then Secretary General of the African National Congress (ANC), Gwede Mantashe. It is entitled ***The danger of sacrificing principle at the altar of greater power.***

Fakir cites Eusebius Mckaiser (The Star, 2 December 2013): “...there is a crisis of critical thinking in today’s South Africa”. The author writes that there is also a lack of proper thinking among leaders. The ANC is practicing realpolitik by regarding principle as something that can be “sacrificed at the altar of greater power”. Credibility of processes, organisational rules, the integrity of institutions, all of these mean less for Mantashe, and the ANC, than maintaining alliance unity. We have seen that to be the case since this article was published, and particularly, in the government of President Cyril Ramaphosa.

“Such relativity in moral and ethical reasoning” prevents the start of a “new social order built on accountability and integrity in which new social and political norms are established”, with a “new institutional infrastructure that is underpinned by a set of predictable and consistently applied rules that can take root for the good of society. Such a startlingly clear lack of commitment to principle among our senior political leaders can prove socially explosive for our politics in the long term”.

Fakir has also been proved right since 2013, and Gwede Mantashe’s words are by no means the only example of this.

HSRC’s attitude survey

“Tracking societal values in changing times”: The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has conducted the [South African Social Attitudes Survey \(SASAS\)](#) since 2003. “The survey series charts and explains the interaction between the country’s changing institutions, its political and economic structures, and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations”. The annual samples of between 3500-7000 individuals aged 16 and older, regardless of nationality or citizenship, are also geographically spread across the nine provinces.

“The thematic content of the survey tries to identify key topics that would provide reliable and robust measures to shape our understanding of present-day South Africa and the processes of change within it”. SASAS is intended as “an instrument for identifying and interpreting long-term shifts in social circumstances and values, rather than simply monitoring short-term changes”.

The SASAS data, and various studies of the data, shed light on shifting perceptions in SA.

General Household Survey

An [article](#), by Willem J Schoeman, which is based on South African religious demography as surveyed by the 2013 General Household Survey (GHS) (16 Feb. 2017), is called ***The religious demography as a reality for faith communities.***

I read it to try and understand why such a religious society as ours can be so fraught with corruption. From the 2001 census, the GHS 2013, the second SASAS survey and other surveys, it seems that

there is an increase in the adherence to the Christian religion in SA. What is the influence and role of Christians in the South African society?

Trust plays an important role in a democratic society. Do the citizens believe in or trust the institutions that serve them? "Churches appear consistently to enjoy the highest level of trust across the country, with four out of five South Africans indicating that they either trust or strongly trust churches". Institutions that were at the bottom of the levels of trust are the police, the Scorpions Unit, local police stations and labour unions. This placed the Church and its membership in an important position to have an influence on the South African society. Seventy-four per cent (74%) believe that God exists and they have no doubts about it. SA emerges as strongest in its popular belief in God, even more than a decade after the same statements were put to nationally representative samples in 16 other countries, namely in Europe, but including the relatively religious Philippines, Poland, United States, Northern Ireland and Ireland. About 63% of the South African respondents reported that they prayed once or several times a day.

Two questions were asked, one about tax compliance and the other on honesty regarding accessing a government social grant. Only 49% indicated that it was seriously wrong if taxpayers did not report all their income in order to pay tax, while 58% reported that it was seriously wrong to submit incorrect information in order to qualify for a social grant.

It seems that many South Africans have a flexible attitude towards their tax obligations on the one hand, and the extent to which they can access cash benefits from the state on the other.

In conclusion, the second SASAS report stated that Christians held strong orthodox views in relation to the Christian doctrine, claiming to believe in God (74%) and in the Bible as the literal word of God (64%); and 'Jesus is the solution to all the world's problems' (76%). This may also be seen as being in step with Christian communities in the South that place an emphasis on the Bible and biblical authority that differs from the outlook common in Europe and North America (Jenkins 2006:8). A critical question may be posed about the role that Christians play in dealing with the state and its institutions: Should honesty not play a more important role, or how do Christians and churches position themselves within society?

My opinion is that it is not only the government that is playing 'realpolitik' - the public is also doing so. Considering that most South Africans find it hard to cover all their essential expenses with the income they receive or earn, and that wage/salary earners have multiple dependents, it is not surprising that many would regard the government as demanding too much from the taxpayer. Perhaps 'the government' is also perceived as too abstract an entity, not a person or people, and thus taxpayers do not regard the withholding of money from SARS as stealing?

What are the conditions within which corruption tends to be prevalent in a country? Do such conditions apply to South Africa?

I came across the following paper published in the International Journal of Economics, Business and Finance. The authors are in the Department of Accountancy, at Accra Polytechnic in Ghana.

[*Determining Factors Affecting Corruption: A Cross Country Analysis*](#) by Ransford Quarmyne Churchill, William Agbodohu, and Peter Arhenful.

The authors did statistical analyses to develop a model for comparison of countries in terms of factors that tend to be present where corruption is prevalent. They included data for 133 countries for the years 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002 and 2004, in relation to ten indicators, and recorded 504 observations.

It is the nature of such studies that statistical correlation between trends is shown, but that causal relationships cannot be concluded from such evidence. Research in this regard would be useful.

What follows is the authors' highlighting of some of the variables for discussion, and my reflection on how these variables might be applicable to South Africa. The authors conclude:

1. Ethnic Diversity. "Ethnic diversity is a key determinant of control of corruption". There is of course nothing that can be done to change this. "Ethnic diversity may trigger nepotism, a root

of corruption (citing Treisman 2000). People would tend perhaps, to put the interests of their ethnic group first, ahead of the national interest. When in power, people may abuse their positions to benefit the group from which they come. This could apply to access of natural resources, procurement contracts, etc.”

In South Africa, this is a highly contentious issue, and I am aware that my reflection may offend some people. We are reluctant to speak of ethnicity, as the dominant social narrative is that we are all one society and nation, regardless of where we come from in the country. This is part of our inheritance from the liberation struggle. The Apartheid regime had a policy of ‘divide and rule’ and emphasised the differences among ethnic groups. Furthermore, the narrative is that the majority is united by the ruling party, which in principle does not privilege any particular ethnic group. I am supportive of the approach that de-emphasises ethnicity, in the interests of building a South African nation, yet the reality of actual social interactions needs to be made explicit, if we are to address possible factors associated with corruption. Has anyone dared to study whether ethnicity has an effect on the way corruption is played out? Ethnicity is of course not the only factor. Yet there are networks of privilege. It would be interesting to know who the people are who typically derive benefit from such networks. Anecdotally, these seem to be people from the same extended family, or friends, or people who have done business with the person in power before. That is the nature of networking, I think, that the social network of any individual would include particularly, people from the same region and cultural background. It would include people that the powerful person can trust or whose loyalty they can expect, in some way. Because this is a natural way of building social networks, it is perhaps hard to prevent people in some position of power to privilege their own particular social network.

2. Political Stability. “Mitigating corruption is a long process, which required continuous effort from the government and the civil society”. Political stability is also a prerequisite for law enforcement. World Bank data show that the scores for political stability and control of corruption are strongly related. Politically unstable countries tend to have leaders that abuse their short time in office to enrich themselves for personal gain at the expense of the country.

South Africa has political stability in the sense that the ruling party has been voted into position repeatedly in credible elections. However, the party is fractured, and there is ongoing competition for power within the party, causing the voting process to be close to meaningless. One cannot vote for one faction or another. Without a ‘faction’ that is clearly in charge and has the power to implement change, the desired change is close to impossible to achieve. In addition, law enforcement was deliberately crippled during the period of the previous president’s rule of the country, as part of rampant corruption at the time.

The authors’ mention of politicians’ short terms in office might be a very influential factor in South Africa’s case. Given unemployment, persistent inequality and perhaps lack of skills, politicians and state employees may simply be making the most of their temporary time in office to ensure that they have wealth, and can distribute wealth to those connected to them, before their privilege of office ends. Yet, state employees in government offices are generally well remunerated, with generous annual increases approved time and again. Is there possibly a sense that in order to escape the poverty that the majority have been and are subjected to, ‘insurance’ against such personal experience of poverty must be secured at all costs?

3. Urban Population. The authors write that at some point the proportion of the urban population relative to the rural population has a negative relationship with the control of corruption score. However, after reaching a certain level, an increase in proportion of the urban population has a positive effect on the control of corruption score. The authors surmise that this could relate to countries that rely primarily on service industries, and that strengthening corruption control is part of maintaining an efficient economy in these cases.

South Africa’s rate of urbanisation is high, but we have a substantial farming sector and rural population. It could be argued that our country is in the phase where corruption is expected to take place, i.e. where the urban population is substantial and growing.

4. Economic Openness. “The regression model shows that economic openness, calculated as the ratio between export and import and total GDP has [a] negative coefficient and is statistically significant. This is in contradiction with my hypothesis that built on the assumption that economic openness opens the domestic market for foreign producers”.

Economic openness has certainly not helped to stem corruption in South Africa, although it is not clear to me how it might be a ‘determinant’ of corruption.

5. Economic Freedom. “The regression model shows that economic freedom has [a] positive coefficient and is statistically significant”. Economic freedom reduces economic informality which is prone to corruption. A measure of “the degree to which the policies and institutions of countries are supportive of economic freedom” is included in the study. This, in turn, is dependent on (1) government size, which should be sufficient to “provide high quality and fair service to the public”. (2) The presence of legal structure (clarity in law as to which activities are deemed illegal) and property rights – so that bribes need not be paid for protection. (3) Access to “sound money or currency”, so that the use of “illegal money” is discouraged. (4) Freedom to trade internationally. (5) Regulation of credit, labour and business. “In sum, economic freedom makes starting, doing and closing business relatively easy”.

The first requirement that the authors describe as the size of the government is incorrect, because a bloated public service does not lead to good and fair service of the public. The factors of a good public service should be reviewed and studied separately.

South Africa has most of the requirements for economic freedom listed by the authors, and yet it has corruption. South Africa does have a sound legal framework, but one often hears the lament that our legislation and regulations are good in themselves, but are not implemented as they should be. We have a sound currency, freedom to trade internationally, and regulation of credit, labour and business. But I would argue that South Africa does not make it easy to start and do business. It would seem that policies and institutions, important as they are, are not sufficient to prevent corruption.

6. Press Freedom. “The relationship between press freedom and control of corruption is non-linear”. The data shows that countries that have very low quality of press can have a relatively high control of corruption score. The control of corruption score depends on perceptions, so the high score in these countries could be explained by the absence of a critical press. As press freedom increases, the control of corruption score gradually declines, until the press freedom index is at about 40. This is the case for Nigeria, Ghana, Moldova and Pakistan, which are countries with a very low control of corruption score, i.e. they are perceived to be corrupt because of the presence of a critical press. Although the media are able to expose corruption, the governments are impervious to the criticisms of the press and the media are powerless to influence government. Beyond 40, the increase of the press freedom score is associated with an increase in the control of corruption score. A high degree of press freedom means that the media are able to influence the political process. It is then possible for media exposure to lead to government measures to control corruption.

We can take pride in South Africa's freedom of speech and its media freedom, which are signs associated with democracy. The media has also been doing its job of exposing corruption for many years. And yet, the media have not been able to effect much change through such exposures, except perhaps subtly and over a long period of time. SA is therefore in the middle ‘phase’ described by the authors, where a critical press exposes corruption but the government is impervious to these exposures. One can only hope that this has an influence on young people, stimulates debate among them, and has an influence on our country's future. But in our current political landscape the critical and sane messages carried in some of the media have not reached everyone, or have failed to convince.

7. Country Specific Effect. “The country specific factors may consist of factors that cannot be included in the model due to lack of data ...[or] factors that cannot be quantified such as history, local culture and belief, and country geopolitics”.

This is certainly the case for SA. Illiteracy and a lacking culture of reading among large portions of SA's adult population contribute to lack of access to crucial information and hinder democratic participation. The limitations of our education system too, and particularly proficiency in English, result in lack of knowledge and insight among voters and make people vulnerable to manipulation by politicians who speak their languages. Despite the failures of the education system, I think it is fair to say that there has been improvement over time, though excruciatingly slow. There is also hope in the ubiquity of electronic gadgets and machines. More people have television, cell phones, computers and internet connectivity than ever before, and young people who have smart phones and some data have the world at their fingertips (at least some of the time). It is expected that the voting population will become ever more critical, and that when politicians realise this, they will have to find more substantial ways to woo the voters, beyond food parcels and T-shirts.

World Values Survey

Another source of data is the [World Values Survey \(WVS\)](#). Jointly with another organisation, surveys were done in 78 countries/territories.

The WVS-7 dataset includes over 300 indicators, based on the common WVS-7 questionnaire which is standardised across all countries. Macro-level variables for each nation are also included, like the global region, per capita GDP and level of democracy. The WVS-7 questionnaire covers 14 themes, including:

- Social values, attitudes & stereotypes (45 items);
- Social capital, trust and organisational membership (49 items);
- Corruption (9 items);
- Post-materialist index (6 items)
- Science & technology (6 items)
- Religious values (12 items)
- Ethical values & norms (23 items)
- Political interest and political participation (36 items)
- Political culture and political regimes (25 items)

SA is not included in the 7th wave), but was included in waves 1-6 (up to 2013).

Conclusion

Corruption, being a social phenomenon, is not easy to study. Ongoing research in various disciplines and of a multi-disciplinary nature are essential because they should inform decision makers and activists who want to fight corruption.

Serious corruption is found all over the world, but for our country it is particularly disastrous because of our precarious socio-economic situation. Factors associated with corruption are present in the South African socio-political landscape. Looking at country comparisons, we could not have expected to be entirely free from corruption. However, SA's people have made it very clear that they are aware of, worried and angered by ongoing corruption on a large scale, for a very long time. There should have been drastic action against corruption by government by now.

The reasons for persistent corruption are complex – the burdens of poverty and inequality are probably contributing factors, in that people with access to funds (whether legal or illegal) might want to use their power to improve the lives of their relatives, friends, and communities. The temporary nature of political positions does not help to control the situation – once politicians resign, are removed from their posts, voted out, etc, there is usually no safety net that would allow them to maintain a quality of life that they got used to, or even a decent quality of life, and there might be no further opportunities to extend patronage to their families.

A free press and sound legislative framework do not necessarily lead to effective corruption management. As the population becomes increasingly aware of corruption through electronic media, especially the young population, the government has to realise that its time is up. Civil disobedience

and boycotting of elections, which are entirely justified, are not in the interest of a country trying to build itself up economically and socially.

The opinions expressed above are those of the Executive Director, Ms Jansie Niehaus, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the [Executive Committee](#) or [members](#) of the NSTF.