Briefing Paper

Africa Programme
March 2021

Collective action on corruption in Nigeria

The role of religion

Summary

- According to the second household survey conducted in 2018 by the Chatham House Africa Programme's Social Norms and Accountable Governance (SNAG) project in Nigeria, Christians and Muslims in the country have similar beliefs with reference to corruption. This finding holds true whether the fictional person on whose actions the survey vignettes are based is Christian or Muslim. Of the survey respondents, 88 per cent said that the private appropriation of government funds (i.e. corruption) is unacceptable. Only around one in 10 thought it was acceptable.
- When the reason for corruption was changed in the survey, from personal benefit to religious community benefit, 80 per cent of respondents still believed this was an unacceptable practice. However, 20 per cent (or one in five of those surveyed) stated that taking government funds for one's religious community's use was acceptable.
- While religion in Nigeria provides the basis and language for morality and ethical behaviour, there are expectations, pressures and practices, related to norms of religious giving, in-group favouritism, communal financial obligations and material prosperity, which limit the negative consequences for individuals of participating in corruption that benefits a religious community.
- Faith-based anti-corruption interventions need to be reframed or developed to be sensitive to: the potential acceptability of corruption or expectation of misuse of government funds for religious purposes; the influence of social expectations of religious giving, reciprocity and in-group favouritism; and the general association of religiosity or devotion with material prosperity and philanthropic behaviour.

Leena Koni Hoffmann
and Raj Navanit Patel

FATHER FORGIVE THEM
LORD REMEMBER ME
IF THOU BE CHRIST

Introduction

Anti-corruption efforts can be limited by a lack of evidence of the drivers of corruption, which makes it difficult to identify appropriate and effective solutions. However, evidence-gathering on corruption is starting to focus more systematically on the complex social characteristics and informal rules that drive and sustain corrupt practices.[1] Social norms research, in particular, is gaining attention in anti-corruption efforts and policymaking, as it serves as a diagnostic tool to assess the behavioural causes of various types of corruption and the social factors that create a tolerant environment for such practices.[2]

Understanding both how corruption functions as a collective practice and the social markers that determine what actions are acceptable or disapproved of by citizens is crucial to improving the success of anti-corruption efforts. The social consequences of failing to adhere to social expectations have a powerful influence on how people behave as members of a society, and how they choose to act in different situations.[3] This influence is also an important factor in determining whether the level of coordination and cooperation necessary for collectively and sustainably tackling corruption can be galvanized.[4]

The Chatham House Africa Programme's Social Norms and Accountable Governance (SNAG) project[5] adopts an approach based on a social norms methodology to systematically test for shared beliefs and expectations that inform individuals' behaviours and their choices to engage in or refrain from, or to accept or reject, corruption.[6] With a primary focus on Nigeria, and working with the methodology developed by our research partners at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Social Norms and Behavioural Dynamics, SNAG implemented its second national household survey in Nigeria in 2018,[7] investigating the social beliefs that motivate different forms of corruption.[8] This briefing paper is one in a series of three, providing analysis of data from the different survey scenarios on three separate behaviours: the diversion of government funds for religious community use; bribery in exchange for improved grades in national examinations; and vote-selling.

The survey scenario focusing on the role of religious reasons in the acceptability of corruption assessed for expectations and beliefs about the diversion of public funds for the provision of religious goods, such as the construction of churches or mosques. This paper presents analysis of the data to show whether religious purposes or benefits play a role in social evaluations of corrupt behaviour.

---

[1] Kubbe, I. and Engelbert A. (eds) (2018), *Corruption and Norms – Why Informal Rules Matter*, Palgrave Macmillan.
[2] Jackson, D. and Köbis, N. C. (2018), *Anti-corruption through a social norms lens*, U4 Issue 2018:7, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway.
[3] Bicchieri, C., Lindemans, J. W. and Jiang, T. (2014), 'A structured approach to a diagnostic of collective practices', Frontiers of Psychology, 5: 1418, https:v/www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4257103.
[4] Marquette, H. and Peiffer, C. (2015), *Corruption and Collective Action*, research paper, Anti-corruption Resource Centre, https://www.dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/corruption-and-collective-action.
[5] Chatham House (n.d.), 'Social Norms and Accountable Governance (SNAG)', https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments/africa-programme/social-norms-and-accountable-governance-snag.
[6] Throughout this paper corruption is used in the commonly defined sense of the abuse of entrusted power or public office for private gain: World Bank (1997), *Helping Countries Combat Corruption: The Role of the World Bank*, Washington, DC, The World Bank: p. 8, http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/anticorrupt/corruptn/corrptn.pdf.
[7] The Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey of 2018 was implemented in collaboration with Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission's Anti-Corruption Academy of Nigeria (ICPC-ACAN) and a network of academics and researchers based in Nigerian universities.
[8] Using a vignette-centred questionnaire, this survey tested whether and how people engage in corruption because they hold certain beliefs about what others in their community think and believe.

The key messages from this research underscore the critical role played by social beliefs and expectations in sustaining corruption, and notes some challenges with relying on religious norms and language in anti-corruption efforts – especially in the design of anti-corruption messages. It also highlights the sticky problem with using religion and morality as interchangeable concepts[9] as well as the pitfalls of grounding anti-corruption interventions in moral beliefs. Several studies of morality as a code of conduct have shown that while morality may be central to the practice of most religions, religion is not central to morality.[10] In addition, moral rules tend to be independent of shared social beliefs – and practices driven by moral rules are therefore not influenced by what others think and believe. Corrupt practices tend to be interdependent and supported by what people think others in their community believe and do, which means that, in a context where corruption is socially embedded and the perception that 'everybody does it' is widespread, solutions must be grounded in changing a community's beliefs and expectations, rather than relying on an individual's moral code. Anti-corruption efforts that rely heavily on an individual's moral code are invariably costly in social terms (i.e. status and a sense of belonging) especially when there is a tolerance and even tacit endorsement or expectation of corrupt behaviour.

Context: religion in Nigeria

In many parts of the world, religion provides people with social solidarity and strong feelings of belonging.[11] It also establishes and legitimizes forms of social order by prescribing the norms, practices and behaviours that actuate shared identities.[12] Most religious teachings stipulate sanctions for undesired conduct as well as rewards for accepted behaviour.

As the most populous country in Africa and one of the continent's most religious,[13] Nigeria's religious identities and practices are a crucial lens for understanding social relations and phenomena. A 2017 Afrobarometer survey on religion in Africa found that 56 per cent of respondents in Nigeria identified as Christian and 42 per cent identified as Muslim. Fewer than 5 per cent of respondents in Nigeria said they identified with other or no religious beliefs. As an indication of religious participation, 49 per cent of Nigerians taking part in the Afrobarometer survey said that they were active members of religious groups that met outside of regular worship services, while 10 per cent of those surveyed described themselves as leaders in their religious communities.[14]

---

[9] Gert explains that morality 'can be used either (1) descriptively to refer to certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or [some other] group (such as a religion) or accepted by an individual for her own behaviour; or (2) normatively to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational people.' He goes on to argue that morality as a universal guide for governing the behaviour of all rational people rules out religious beliefs, since there is no religious belief that all rational people share. See Gert, B. and Gert, J. (2020), 'The Definition of Morality' in Zalta E. N. (ed.) (2020), *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/morality-definition.
[10] McKay, R. and Whitehouse, H. (2015), 'Religion and morality', *Psychological Bulletin*, 141(2): p. 447.
[11] Phau, I. and Kea, G. (2007), 'Attitudes of university students toward business ethics: A cross-national investigation of Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong', *Journal of Business Ethics,* 72(1): pp. 65–75, doi:10.1007/s10551-006-9156-8.
[12] Light, D., Keller, S. and Calhoun, C. (1989), *Sociology*, New York: Knorf, p. 522.
[13] According to a Pew Research Center report in 2018, 88 per cent of people in Nigeria said that religion is very important in their lives. Pew Research Centre (2018), 'The Age Gap in Religion Around the World', p. 14, https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages.

In Nigeria, religious beliefs, identities and practices are very public social markers and animate everyday behaviours and interactions. From social events to workplace meetings, the demonstration of a belief in a divine being that determines fortunes and outcomes as well as apportioning rewards and punishments is highly visible across the country. Religious organizations also play a vital role in Nigeria, often providing social services, financial support and the means for social mobility to adherents.

Many religious organizations in Nigeria fill a critical gap in service provision left by the general failings of state governance and poor funding of public institutions at federal, subnational and local levels.

Many religious organizations in Nigeria fill a critical gap in service provision left by the general failings of state governance and poor funding of public institutions at federal, subnational and local levels. Services and benefits provided by religious organizations can be thought of as 'club goods', as they tend to provide exclusive benefits for members of the relevant religious community. For example, services provided at a church or a mosque are limited to its members (i.e. Christians or Muslims, respectively). However, religious organizations may also provide broader public goods where state social safety nets are lacking or absent, by generating non-excludable benefits for an entire community through charity and social services. So religious organizations in Nigeria often provide a range of both club goods (i.e. exclusive to their members) and public goods (i.e. benefiting other community members – for example, food donations or free medical check-ups for people in need, irrespective of their religious beliefs).[15]

Religious communities provide a sense of belonging, and religious teachings, particularly associated with various Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, promise adherents material prosperity as a direct consequence of their faith in God.[16] Therefore, success in business, politics, career or life generally and material wealth are typically viewed as divine rewards that should be acknowledged through reciprocal giving (including the giving of public funds) to the religious community. The exponential growth of Pentecostal movements in Nigeria over recent decades has deepened the belief that holiness is evidenced by prosperity, and this has combined with norms of giving to religious leaders and community, as well as social pressures to demonstrate material prosperity.[17] These social norms and pressures can provide a justification for, rather than criticism of, corrupt behaviour.

---

[14] Howard, B. (2020), 'Religion in Africa: Tolerance and trust in leaders are high, but many would allow regulation of religious speech', Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 339, 28 January 2020, http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf.

[15] Of Nigeria's total population, 40.1 per cent – roughly 82.9 million people – lived below the country's poverty line of 137,430 naira (roughly $400) per year in 2019, nine out of the 10 poorest states are in the northern region, with Sokoto, Taraba and Jigawa being the poorest – more than 87 per cent of residents in these states are poor, see NBS (2019), *2019 Poverty and Inequality Report,* https://nigerianstat.gov.ng/download/1092; Akinpelu, Y. (2020), 'In Sokoto, Taraba, Jigawa, about nine in ten people are poor – NBS', *Premium Times*, 14 May 2020, https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/392744-in-sokoto-taraba-jigawa-about-nine-in-ten-people-are-poor-nbs.html.

[16] The growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement in Nigeria, and across Africa, has been fuelled by a strong focus on personal empowerment manifested in material prosperity, healing or what is described as 'divine health' and deliverance from evil spirits. See Obadare, E. (2018), *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Correspondingly, while reformist Islam in Nigeria emphasizes frugality, it also emphasizes charity to one's religious community in the form of *zakat,* which is a mandatory obligation for all Muslims to contribute a portion of their wealth to charitable causes. *Zakat* is considered a form of worship and is expected in Islam.[18] It is determined by wealth and income and it translates literally as 'to purify' – referring to the purification of the wealth of the rich by assigning a portion of it to the poor, not just as a gift, but as a recognition of that portion of wealth as belonging to the poor.[19] In accordance with the teaching of Islam, it is considered morally wrong and objectionable (impure) for a person to acquire any wealth and consume it 'alone'. Therefore, z*akat* is a core Islamic belief and practice that serves the twin purposes of providing for the poor while also redistributing wealth – a sort of mechanism for providing social protection. The purpose of giving obligatory *zakat* and voluntary *sadaqa* (almsgiving) is to show solidarity with the global Muslim community, support the collective well-being of an individual's community and also secure the good fortune associated with charity.[20]

Religion and anti-corruption efforts

Although the language of religion is very frequently used to talk about corruption and to shape both policy and programmatic solutions to the issue, religion remains one of the most under-studied sociocultural influences on corrupt activity in Nigeria.[21] Likewise, how religious values and institutions influence issues such as development, good governance and social cohesion remains unclear and is often misunderstood. For example, during Nigeria's democratic transition in 1998, the popular push for the reintroduction and implementation of Islamic law (*sharia*) in northern Nigeria was tied to the region's problems with corruption, inequality and poor governance. These issues were strongly characterized as moral problems that, correspondingly, required a strong moral response, paving the way for the adoption of *sharia* in 12 of Nigeria's northern states by 2002. However, despite almost two decades of the implementation of *sharia* criminal law, corruption, inequality and poor governance remain endemic and human development indicators have worsened across Nigeria's northern states.[22]

---

[17] The 'prosperity gospel' or 'Word of Faith' teachings are a key characteristic of Pentecostalism. For a global analysis of Pentecostalism, see, Eriksen, A., Llera Blanes, R. and MacCarthy, M. (2019), *Going to Pentecost: An Experimental Approach to Studies in Pentecostalism*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

[18] *Zakat* as a religious obligation is different from *sadaqa*, which is voluntary almsgiving. *Zakat* and endowment institutions administer the collection, distribution and management of *zakat* and endowments. Sokoto was one of the early adopters of *sharia* law and quickly implemented *zakat* and endowment institutions. It is one of several states that has adopted the emirate structure for collecting monies and provisions from those paying *zakat* and for distributing *zakat* in communities: for example, in neighbourhoods, at mosques and in hospitals. Sokoto also has a fairly elaborate system of record-keeping and distribution, which includes the publication of annual reports and regular periodicals on major distributions.

[19] For more on *Zakat* & *Waqf* (hubs) institutions in Nigeria, see, Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (2016), *Sharia Implementation in Northern Nigeria Over 15 Years*, Policy Brief No. 3, Zakat & Waqf Institutions, Abuja: NSRP, https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/sites/www.odid.ox.ac.uk/files/Sharia%20-%20POLICY%20BRIEF%20THREE%20Final%20Version.pdf.

[20] Singer, A. (2013), 'Giving Practices in Islamic Societies', *Social Research*, 80(2): p. 346, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/528208.

[21] For an overview of Nigeria's religious history and politics; the participation of religious groups in governance and development; and the politics of inclusion and exclusion of religious groups at the subnational level in Nigeria, see Nolte, I., Danjibo, N. and Oladeji, A. (2009), *Religion, Politics and Governance in Nigeria*, Working Paper 39-2009, Religions and Development Research Programme, University of Birmingham, http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/1644/1/Nolte.pdf.

It is in this complex and ambiguous context that governments and non-governmental organizations have sought to frame and shape anti-corruption efforts using religious perspectives on moral standards and ethical behaviour. Partnerships with religious groups and faith-based organizations in anti-corruption programming are premised on a number of assumptions, including: 1) that integrity and ethics are central to the belief systems of the major religions practised in Nigeria (Christianity and Islam) and 2) that religious people are more likely to behave according to ethical standards established and expected by those belief systems.[23]

It is assumed that anti-corruption efforts can be more effective if they are communicated and conducted via religious organizations or leaders, appealing to the moral standards of these major religions.

Following on from this, it is further assumed that anti-corruption efforts can therefore be more effective if they are communicated and conducted via religious organizations or leaders, appealing to the moral standards of these major religions.[24] However, evidence to support these assumptions and demonstrate the positive impact of religion-based anti-corruption interventions remains scant, or is conditioned on other enabling factors.[25] These factors tend to be overlooked in the design of most faith-based anti-corruption interventions.

Secondary literature points to important conditionalities for positive outcomes in religion-based anti-corruption interventions. For instance, a 2012 study of the politics of religion and corruption concluded that religion contributed to reducing corruption only in contexts where the public have strong democratic values and view corruption as destructive to democratic governance. The conclusion was that religion can be a source of good governance, but that this outcome is highly conditioned on the institutional context. So, in contexts 'where political corruption is not viewed as an unethical behaviour, religious cues are unlikely to suppress it'.[26]

---

[22] Hoffmann, L. K. (2014), *Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20140703NorthernNigeriaHoffmann.pdf.

[23] Marquette, H. (2012), '"Finding God' or 'Moral Disengagement' in the Fight Against Corruption in Developing Countries? Evidence from India and Nigeria', *Public Administration and Development*, 32(1): p. 14, doi:10.1002/pad.1605.

[24] Traditional leaders may be another authority through which such efforts are channelled, but they were not the focus of this survey and the question is therefore beyond the scope of this paper.

[25] The least religious countries of the world, such as Finland, New Zealand and Denmark, are often ranked among the least corrupt by Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index: Transparency International (2019), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2019*, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019#.

It is also often the case that many assumptions of the role of religious beliefs and values in anti-corruption interventions tend not to be locally tested. As a result, faith-based anti-corruption interventions may be too broad; covering a range of group behaviours rather than specific forms, and symptoms rather than causes. Some Nigeria-focused research in this area has shown that while religion may have some impact on attitudes towards corruption, religious beliefs are unlikely to have a significant impact on corrupt behaviour.[27] Religion is therefore a limited, or limiting, entry point for engagement on anti-corruption.[28]

A social norms approach to tackling corruption

A social norm can be defined as when:

> Most people in the relevant community conform to a certain behaviour; most of the people in the relevant community believe they *should* conform to that behaviour; and there is a preference[29] to conform with the group.[30]

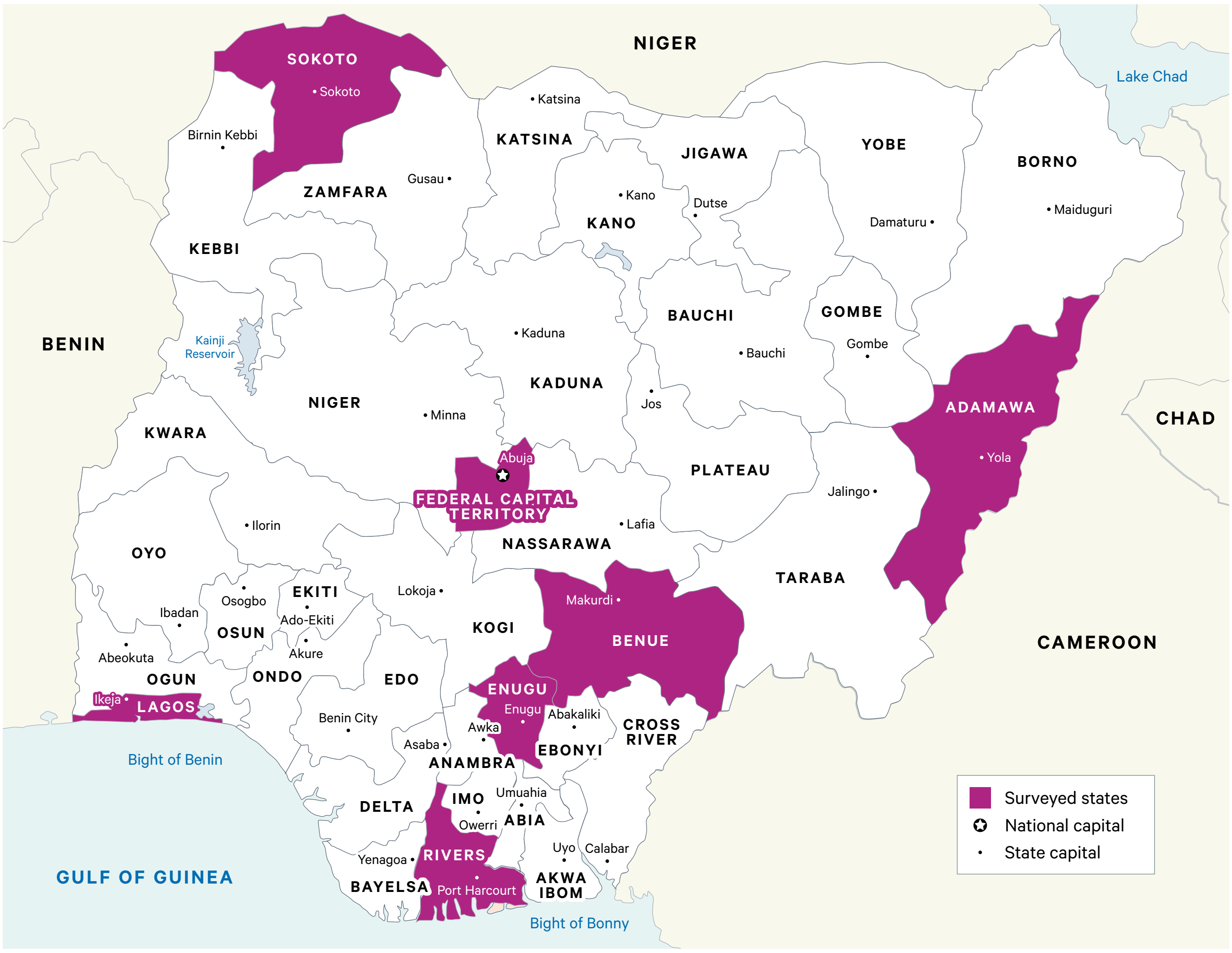
Social norms surveys serve to identify whether a behaviour or collective practice is driven by a social norm, or by other beliefs or factors. The diagnostic tool provided by the approach in this case enhances understanding of people's expectations and judgments of corruption for religious purposes, and therefore improves understanding of the role of religion in corruption or anti-corruption efforts.

The 2018 survey scenario focused on people's beliefs and judgments related to corrupt behaviour for religious reasons or with the purpose of benefiting a particular religious community. The survey did not directly measure perceptions or opinions about corruption or religion, but instead focused on behaviours and actions, with questions crafted around what respondents expected others to do and what they believed others should do. This is the first quantitative study in an African context to test whether there are variations in people's beliefs and expectations towards corruption based on the motivation for the behaviour (i.e. the abuse of public office for personal gain versus the abuse of office for religious organization or community gain). As a result, this study shows how religious justifications may influence evaluations about corruption in ways that may impact on the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts.

---

[26] Sommer, U., Ben-Nun Bloom, P. and Arikan, G. (2012), 'Does Faith Limit Immorality? The Politics of Religion and Corruption', *Democratization*, 20(2): p. 15, doi:10.1080/13510347.2011.650914.
[27] Marquette (2011), "Finding God' or 'Moral Disengagement' in the Fight Against Corruption in Developing Countries? Evidence from India and Nigeria', p. 4.
[28] Cheeseman, N. and Peiffer, C. (2020), 'The unintended consequences of anti-corruption messaging in Nigeria: Why pessimists are always disappointed', Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) Working Paper 024, London: SOAS University of London, https://ace.soas.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACE-WorkingPaper024-Nigeria UnintendedConsequences-200608.pdf.
[29] Preference here refers to the disposition to act in a specific way in a specific situation. Preferences can be conditional or unconditional on expectations about other people's behaviours and beliefs.
[30] See Bicchieri, C. (2016), *Norms in the wild: How to diagnose, measure, and change social norms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Map 1. Chatham House Africa Programme Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey, by state, 2018


NIGER
Lake Chad
SOKOTO
Sokoto
Katsina
KATSINA
Birnin Kebbi
JIGAWA
YOBE
BORNO
Gusau
ZAMFARA
Kano
Dutse
Maiduguri
Damaturu
KANO
KEBBI
BAUCHI
GOMBE
Gombe
Kaduna
Bauchi
BENIN
Kainji Reservoir
ADAMAWA
NIGER
KADUNA
Jos
CHAD
Minna
KWARA
Abuja
Yola
PLATEAU
FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITORY
Jalingo
Ilorin
Lafia
NASSARAWA
OYO
TARABA
Lokoja
EKITI
Osogbo
Makurdi
Ibadan
Ado-Ekiti
OSUN
KOGI
CAMEROON
BENUE
Akure
Abeokuta
OGUN
ONDO
EDO
ENUGU
Ikeja
LAGOS
Enugu
Abakaliki
Benin City
Awka
CROSS RIVER
Asaba
EBONYI
Bight of Benin
ANAMBRA
Umuahia
IMO
DELTA
Owerri
ABIA
Yenagoa
RIVERS
Uyo
Calabar
GULF OF GUINEA
BAYELSA
Port Harcourt
AKWA IBOM
Bight of Bonny
Surveyed states
National capital
State capital

Source: Chatham House. Note that the boundaries and names shown and designations used on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by Chatham House or the authors.

The specialized survey tests people's beliefs about government or bureaucratic corruption through a set of vignettes or stories based on the actions of a fictional legislator. Survey respondents were able to infer the religion of the fictional legislator based on their name, which was randomly assigned.[31] The survey randomized between these two religious identities to systematically test whether people would answer differently if they were asked about the corrupt behaviour of a Muslim or Christian.[32]

---

[31] The methodology for the survey included randomly assigning *who* was to be interviewed in the household as well as randomly assigned independent variables *within* the survey itself. Randomizing between Muslim and Christian religious identities enabled the survey team to produce credible and replicable data on the causal influence of the independent variable on the respondent's beliefs, without having to interview the entire population of Nigeria.
[32] Randomization is a common practice in survey and experimental design, which is intended to minimize bias, since it gives an equal chance firstly for who will be interviewed and then for those respondents themselves to receive a randomly assigned independent variable, meaning that any other lurking variables are (generally) evenly distributed across a population. This means that if a population that is 90 per cent Christian is asked a question that randomly assigns the independent variable (Muslim or Christian), and it is found that on average Christians respond differently depending on whether the question randomizes one independent variable (Muslim) over the other (Christian), then it can be inferred that the independent variable did in fact influence the respondent's answer. This way, the study offers insights into beliefs about the behaviours of Christians and Muslims in public office, as well as a means of assessing these beliefs based on the religious identities of the respondents in the survey.

This survey went beyond the focus of the existing research in the religion and corruption space by looking at the effect of religious justifications on the acceptability of corruption. The study shows that this approach is crucial to understanding how anti-corruption interventions that aim to leverage religious perspectives and institutions – especially in anti-corruption messaging – can either backfire or be complicated by other social realities such as expectations of charity, religious giving and reciprocity towards an individual's religious community.

Sample design

The survey implementation partner, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), developed and recently updated its National Integrated Survey of Households (NISH) frame covering all 36 federal states in Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja, with 200 Enumeration Areas (EAs) per state and in FCT Abuja. This NISH master sample frame was constructed out of the original master frame of the National Population Commission (NPC) for the Housing and Population Census of 2006, which established 23,280 EAs (30 EAs for each of Nigeria's 768 local government areas (LGAs) and 40 EAs for each of Abuja FCT's 6 Area Councils). The 200 EAs that make up the NISH frame are grouped into 20 independent replicates with 10 EAs in each replicate.

The Chatham House Africa Programme's Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences survey of 2018 drew the sample for its survey from the NISH frame of 200 EAs. The survey involved a total number of 5,600 households[33] across urban and rural areas in Abuja FCT and in six of Nigeria's 36 federal states: Adamawa, Benue, Enugu, Lagos, Rivers, Sokoto and Abuja. Implementation was carried out through a test-run phase and pilot before the full roll-out from November to December 2018.

The demographic dynamics found in the six case studies offer insights into local specificities as well as the generalizability of insights into the role of religion in evaluating corruption in Nigeria.

The demographic dynamics found in the six case studies offer insights into local specificities as well as the generalizability of insights into the role of religion in evaluating corruption in Nigeria. Lagos state and the FCT are the most ethnically and religiously diverse locations covered in the survey. Lagos is Nigeria's and West Africa's major commercial centre and the headquarters for many of Nigeria's biggest Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Lagos has an equally large Muslim population to that of the FCT, and is home to several influential Islamic organizations. Abuja is Nigeria's seat of government and centre of political power and government-resourced patronage networks. The FCT also has some of the country's wealthiest churches and mosques. Sokoto state is the seat of the sultanate of Sokoto; the Sultan of Sokoto serves as the supreme spiritual leader of Muslims in

---

[33] In each state, 800 households were surveyed.

Nigeria and the grand Sheik of the Qadiriyya Sufi order in the country. Sokoto has a predominantly Muslim population, while Adamawa's is relatively mixed. Benue, Enugu and Rivers are predominantly Christian with a mix of Catholic, Anglican, evangelical Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. It should be noted that although Rivers is one of Nigeria's richest oil-producing states, its population suffers low development outcomes in the politically contested Niger Delta region.

Research findings

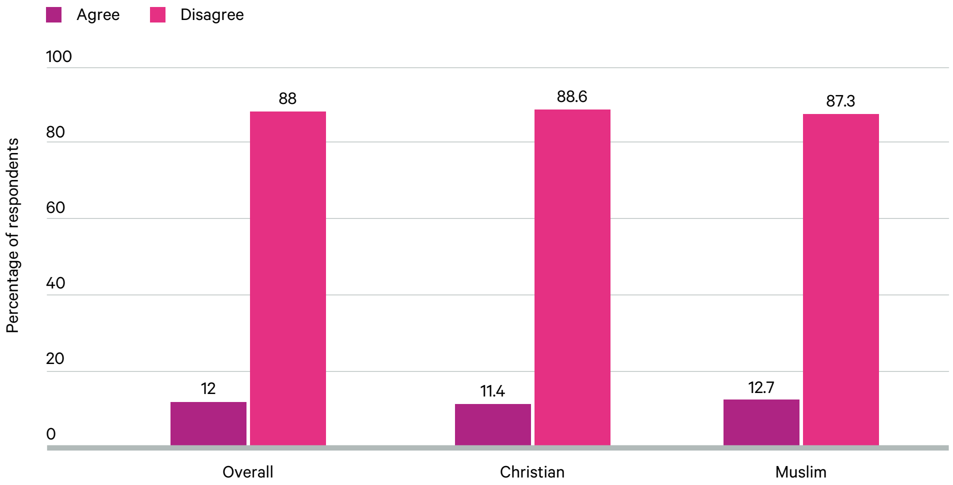
Christians and Muslims in Nigeria have similar beliefs with reference to corruption, according to the survey. This holds true whether the respondent is Christian or Muslim, and whether the fictional person in the survey vignette is Christian or Muslim. Regardless of their or the fictional character's religious identity, 88 per cent of respondents said that the private appropriation of government funds (i.e. corruption) was unacceptable. Only around one in 10 thought it was acceptable.

Figure 1. The acceptability of corruption: for personal benefit (by religion)

Question:

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

It would be acceptable for Mr. ________ to take government funds for his personal use.



Source: Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey 2018.

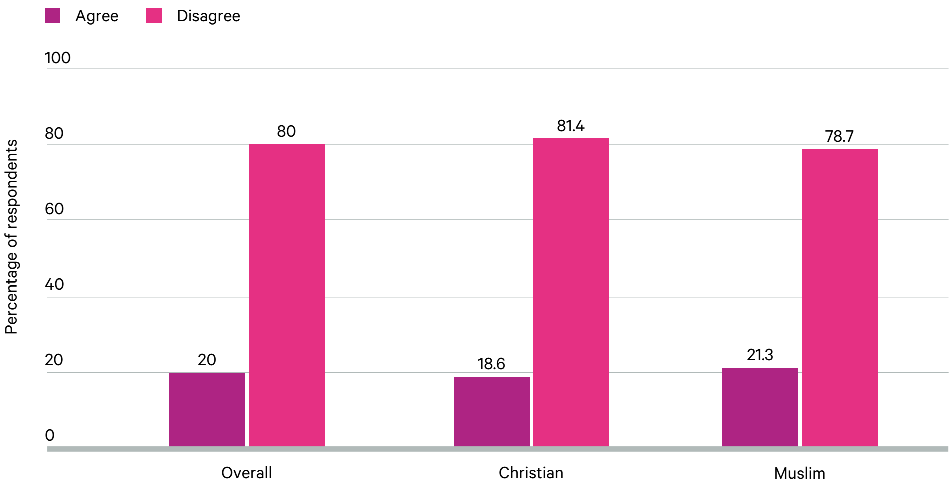
When the reason for corruption was changed from personal benefit to religious community benefit, 80 per cent of respondents still believed this was an unacceptable practice. These are important findings, as they suggest that it is possible to galvanize collective action against abuses of public resources by officials, and they also confirm findings from the first round of the survey, in 2016, which showed that in most cases, a significant number of Nigerians consider bribery and embezzlement as both personally and socially unacceptable forms of corruption.[34]

---

[34] Hoffmann, L. K. and Patel, R. N. (2017), *Collective Action on Corruption in Nigeria: A Social Norms Approach to Connecting Society and Institutions*, Chatham House Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-05-17-corruption-nigeria-hoffmann-patel-final.pdf.

Figure 2. The acceptability of corruption: for religious benefit (by religion)

Question:
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
It would be acceptable for Mr. _______ to take government funds for his religious community's use.



Source: Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey 2018.

However, 20 per cent (or one in five of those surveyed) stated that taking government funds for one's religious community's use was acceptable – this is almost double the number of respondents (12 per cent) who said that the diversion of government funds for personal use was acceptable. There is a slight variation between the religious composition of the group that found corruption for religious purposes acceptable, and that of the group that found corruption for private gain acceptable. Of those who were in favour of corruption to benefit one's religious community, 57.3 per cent are Christian, and 42.1 per cent are Muslim. Of those who said corruption for private gain was acceptable, 66.5 per cent are Christian, and 32.9 per cent are Muslim.

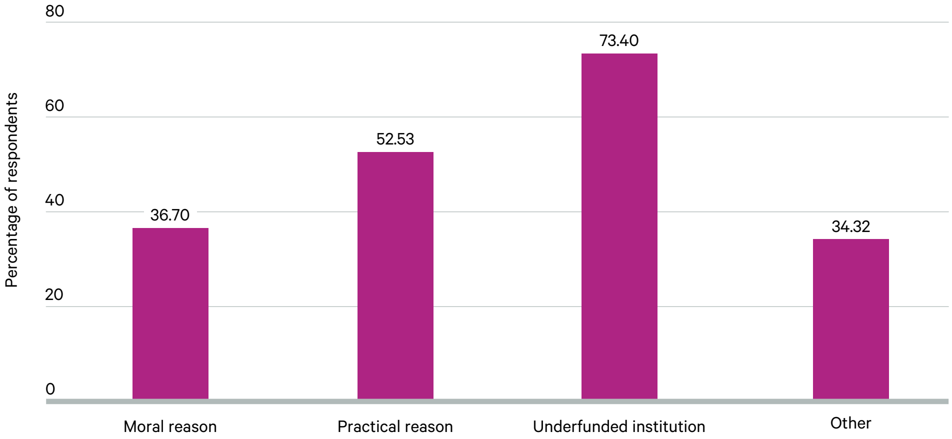
So, providing benefits to one's religious community seems to influence the social acceptability and justifiability of corruption, because at least one-fifth of respondents believe that it is appropriate to divert public funds for an individual's religious community's use. This is significant when considering social factors that can influence the acceptability of corruption, and other evidence shows that religion increases favouritism and selectivity for a specific group. Such variations have been shown in similar studies of misappropriation and in-group versus out-group dynamics.[35]

---

[35] Studies by La Porta et al. (1997) and Yenegah and Sauers (2013), show that religiosity is likely to increase the incidence of corrupt behaviour by discriminating between faithful versus unfaithful and in-group versus out-group, thus creating networks that can be used for favouritism, cronyism, nepotism and misappropriation: La Porta, R., Lopez-de-Silanes, F., Shleifer, A. and Vishny, R. W. (1997), 'Trust in Large Organizations', *American Economic Review*, 87(2): pp. 333–8, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/shleifer/files/trust.pdf; Yeganeh, H. and Sauers, D. (2013), 'A Cross-National Investigation into the Effects of Religiosity on the Pervasiveness of Corruption', *Journal of East-West Business*, 19(3): pp. 155–80, doi:10.1080/10669868.2012.760027.

Figure 3. Reasons for the acceptability of corruption: moral vs practical reasons

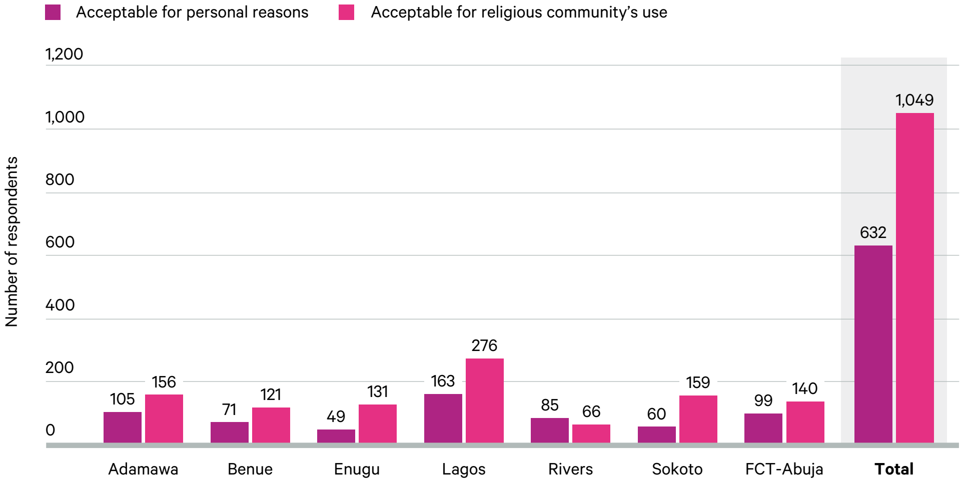
Question:
Why do you think it is acceptable for Mr. ________ to take government funds for his religious community's use?



Source: Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey 2018.

Figure 4. The acceptability of corruption in different states: personal benefit vs religious community benefit

Questions:
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
It would be acceptable for Mr. ________ to take government funds for his personal use.
It would be acceptable for Mr. ________ to take government funds for his religious community's use.



Source: Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey 2018.

Of those who believe corruption for religious purposes is acceptable, more than one-third (36.7 per cent) would consider it acceptable for moral reasons, while more than half (52.5 per cent) believe it acceptable for practical reasons. (Practical reasons in this context may include community need and the structural gap in the availability and access to social services and protection often left by public institutions.) When moral reasons drive a behaviour, they require a different intervention than when practical reasons are a driver.

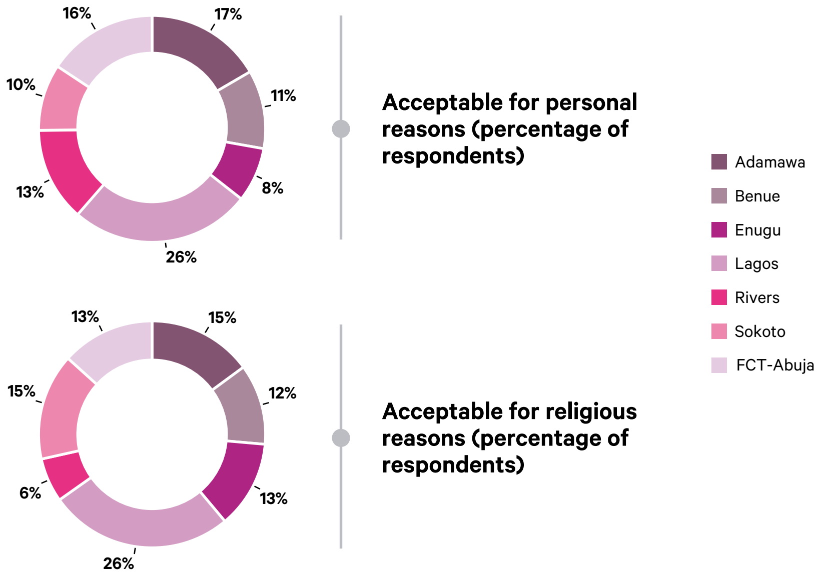
Figures 5 and 6. The acceptability of corruption in different states: personal benefit vs religious community benefit

Questions:

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

It would be acceptable for Mr. ________ to take government funds for his personal use.

It would be acceptable for Mr. ________ to take government funds for his religious community's use.



Source: Local Understandings, Expectations and Experiences Survey 2018.

Of those who found corruption for the benefit of an individual's religious community or for personal gain acceptable, around 60 per cent were located in rural areas, and 40 per cent in urban areas. There was a fairly even balance in terms of gender and socio-economic class.[36] Notably, of all respondents who found corruption for either purpose acceptable across the seven geographical locations in the sample (see figures 4 and 5), more than 25 per cent were based in Lagos, although it only accounted for 14.4 per cent of households surveyed. The responses from Rivers and Sokoto states also stood out: in Rivers, the use of public funds for private gain was, unusually, considered acceptable by a higher number of respondents (13 per cent of the total across all states surveyed) than the use of public funds to benefit a religious community (6 per cent of all respondents). In Sokoto state the opposite was the case, with a significantly higher number of respondents believing the use of public funds for a religious group's benefit was acceptable (making up 15 per cent of all respondents choosing this option), compared to diverting funds for private gain (10 per cent of all respondents). Such striking differences between states underscore the need for considering local context and drivers when designing anti-corruption interventions. In the context of widespread poverty in Nigeria – particularly in the north – and the obligations of *zakat*, combined with the difficulties encountered in determining whether contributions are earned through honest means, it is likely that norms of religious giving and beliefs in the purification of wealth through *zakat* explain the higher levels of acceptance for giving for religious community benefit in Sokoto, one of the country's poorest states. In this way, the lines between public and club goods are blurred.

---

[36] The sample was roughly 50 per cent male and 50 per cent female and was also roughly 50 per cent urban and 50 per cent rural; 20 per cent of respondents were from each wealth quintile.

Additionally, the higher level of acceptance among respondents of corruption for a religious community's use, compared with acceptance of corruption for private gain, raises an obvious question: if religion is associated with ethical and moral behaviour, why is the proportion of people who think corruption is acceptable almost twice as high when it benefits an individual's religious community, as shown in figures 1 and 2.

One possible explanation for this greater acceptance is that, while religion in Nigeria provides the basis and language for morality and ethical behaviour, there are expectations, pressures and practices, related to norms of religious giving, in-group favouritism, communal financial obligations and material prosperity, which limit or mitigate the negative consequences for individuals of participating in corruption that benefits a religious community. At the extreme, these expectations, pressures and practices may even endorse this type of corruption.[37] Religion also encourages and rewards 'loyalty and a tendency towards the acceptance of authority, both of which might undermine attempts to fight corruption'.[38] This suggests that in addition to allowances made for corrupt behaviour because of norms of giving and expectations of in-group favouritism, the power dynamics of religious institutions and the social contract between authority figures and the religious community can reinforce the acceptability, expectation and practice of diverting public funds for religious purposes.

Whether it is the everyday citizen who must dig into their own pockets to donate to their religious community, or the politician who puts a hand into government coffers for the same purpose, both practices tend to be strongly motivated by norms of religious giving. In these instances, the motivation of the politician is more socially acceptable than if they are thought to be abusing office for private gain, as the survey data show. Furthermore, religious beliefs also function within Nigeria's cultural context, which strongly values respectability, hierarchy and deference to figures of authority. This can reinforce or provide justifications for decisions to engage in corruption, as members of religious communities may feel pressure to demonstrate their religious commitment through gifts to religious leaders or financial contributions for building projects, religious celebrations or routine fundraising.

---

[37] Yeganeh and Sauers' study (2013) examined data from 70 countries and found that, in fact, religiosity promoted corruption. It explained this positive relationship as the likely result of religion creating a hierarchical sociocultural structure that promotes the discretionary power of influential individuals and ultimately endorses corruption and lack of accountability. Additionally, in religious societies, both perpetrators and victims of corrupt behaviour seek reassurance through religion and can more easily rationalize a status quo of widespread corruption, see Yeganeh and Sauers (2013), 'A Cross-National Investigation into the Effects of Religiosity on the Pervasiveness of Corruption', p. 174.

[38] Marquette (2011), "Finding God' or 'Moral Disengagement' in the Fight Against Corruption in Developing Countries? Evidence from India and Nigeria', p. 17.

In a 2019 study of behavioural determinants of corruption, Borlea et al. confirmed this association of corruption and power through religious authority, which was found to be present in both Islam and Christianity.[39] The study showed that higher levels of corruption were associated with higher power distance, which leads to the supposition that in countries where there is a highly unequal power distribution in society, citizens are less likely to challenge the status quo of corruption because this also means challenging authority. In this way, corruption is sustained – and along with it, inequality in power distribution – as the control of wealth and patronage continues to rest in the hands of those in authority.

The survey data on which this study is based has shown that the acceptability of corruption increases if it is for religious purposes.

Given Nigeria's history of identity politics and the influence of religion on political preference and clientelism, political actors are aware of the social acceptability of corruption for religious reasons and can use donations and support for religious projects to gain social capital, status and respectability. The survey data on which this study is based has shown that the acceptability of corruption increases if it is for religious purposes, and this sociability gain is very likely to play a role in the strategies of political actors and public officials with access to government resources, as well as in their relationships with religious leaders and institutions. This suggests a rather complicated perception of religious leadership and institutions, which is reflected in a 2017 Afrobarometer survey of religion in Africa.[40] Of the Nigerian respondents to the survey, 20 per cent thought that most or all religious leaders are corrupt, while 60 per cent thought some are corrupt.[41] Paradoxically, 64 per cent of those surveyed claimed to have some or a lot of trust in religious leaders,[42] highlighting how beliefs about corruption can coexist with respect for religious figures and institutions.

Implications for anti-corruption efforts

Even though most people in Nigeria find the abuse of public office for religious reasons unacceptable, this research suggests that religious institutions should not automatically be seen as the most effective means of tackling corruption, because the context is more nuanced. Public sector corruption in Nigeria is a negotiated or fluid, rather than fixed, moral and cultural phenomenon,[43] as this quantitative data analysis demonstrates. While most respondents believe that corruption is unacceptable, for those who do find it to be acceptable, its acceptability almost doubles when it is for religious communities or purposes. This suggests that anti-corruption efforts that seek to leverage religious perspectives or authority may be undermined by the sociability and justifiability of abuses of public office for religious reasons.

---

[39] Borlea, S., Achim, M. and Rus, A. (2019), *Behavioral Determinants of Corruption. A Cross-Country Survey*, 'Vasile Goldis' Western University of Arad – Studia Universitatis Economics Series, 29(1): pp. 21–39, doi:10.2478/sues-2019-0002.
[40] Howard (2020), 'Religion in Africa: Tolerance and trust in leaders are high, but many would allow regulation of religious speech'.
[41] Respondents in the Afrobarometer survey were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders?
[42] Across the 34 countries surveyed, the average level of popular trust in religious leaders (with 69 per cent of respondents expressing some, or a lot of, trust) exceeded levels of trust for any other category of 'key public officials' listed, including the army, courts, presidents, traditional leaders, police and parliament.

In the Nigerian context, norms of religious giving, reciprocity and social pressures associated with expectations of prosperity as a reward for faith can tip the balance against norms of integrity, modest living or ethical behaviour. Equally, the line between normal inclusive public goods and exclusive club goods provided by religious institutions to a community can be blurred, so moral and evaluative judgments about siphoning or diverting government funds to religious purposes are not clear-cut. Consequently, faith-based anti-corruption interventions need to be reframed or developed to be sensitive to:

- the potential acceptability or expectation of misuse of government funds for religious purposes;
- the influence of social expectations of religious giving, reciprocity and in-group favouritism; and
- the general association of religiosity or devotion with material prosperity and philanthropic behaviour.

In Nigeria, moralizing language, specifically religious discourse and expressions, is often used to justify corrupt behaviour and condemn individuals who refrain from engaging in corruption.[44] Descriptions of behaviours and actions as ‘good’ or ‘evil’, ‘wicked’ or ‘virtuous’ are very commonly used in public discourse on corruption in Nigeria.[45] Anti-corruption interventions that rely on or seek to appeal to moral beliefs may be misdiagnosing the problem or potentially exacerbating it, as the drivers of the corrupt practices tend to be complicated and require solutions that address a range of beliefs and expectations.

This analysis provides a basis for moderating expectations regarding the role of religious perspectives and for re-evaluating the role of religious leaders and institutions in addressing corruption. This does not invalidate a religious or faith-based approach to anti-corruption but rather shows how, in specific ways, religious reasons, language and rationale can have the opposite effect. Anti-corruption efforts – whether faith-based or not – intervene in social contexts where other norms and values are present and can considerably influence outcomes.

---

[43] In a 2016 monograph, Steven Pierce discusses how corruption in the Nigerian context ‘reveals an entire moral economy of citizen-state relations, a normative scheme for evaluating official practices and how much might ‘legitimately’ be diverted for unofficial ends’, see, Pierce, S. (2016), *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Conduct in Nigeria*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 23 and p. 227. In Pierce’s analysis of what he describes as the ‘moral economies of corruption’, he argues that in the ‘Nigerian corruption-complex’, some ‘corruption’ can appear acceptable and other corruption not, and that as a category it functions more as ‘a political performative through its use as a justification for official condemnation of officeholders’ but also as a ‘strategy for achieving discrete political ends. Ordinary people do have deep-rooted ideas about how to evaluate official conduct, but these ideas are applied in complex, shifting ways’; Ibid., p. 175.
[44] Hoffmann and Patel (2017), *Collective Action on Corruption in Nigeria*, p. 11.
[45] Ibid.

Religion-based approaches and networks are valuable and can certainly be effective, for example by enabling coordination within communities to undertake collective action so that individuals do not carry the risks and costs of changing behaviour on their own. Religious leaders and institutions can support anti-corruption interventions with signalling and messaging built around evidence of communities' beliefs and expectations: for example, helping to highlight when people within a community have mistaken beliefs about the behaviours and beliefs of others with regard to corruption.

Alternative faith-based approaches to anti-corruption that focus on strengthening democratic values among citizens and supporting citizen-monitoring initiatives can also be very valuable. As an important part of civil society, religious leaders and institutions can be powerful advocates and partners in strengthening Nigeria's burgeoning citizen-led accountability movement, which is exploring and finding innovative ways to bridge gaps in the capacity of state institutions to respond to citizens. The proliferation and embeddedness of religious institutions in Nigerian society places them in strategic positions to amplify the voice of citizens, encourage democratic citizen–government engagement and support citizen advocacy for human rights protection. Faith-based interventions that focus more on encouraging civic engagement and citizen participation in demanding good governance, budget monitoring and human rights protection can be particularly effective, given the central role of religious leadership and institutions in Nigerian society.

Such approaches would mean a shift from the current emphasis on faith-based anti-corruption interventions built around integrity and morality messaging – which tend to emphasize individual choices and multiply costs to individuals if they reject corruption – to participation-enhancing efforts that encourage collective action. In this way, systemic corruption is addressed through a nuanced collective action approach that is context-specific and avoids paying into or reinforcing pre-existing power and resource dynamics.

About the authors

Dr Leena Koni Hoffmann is an associate fellow of the Africa Programme at Chatham House and the Nigeria country lead for the Social Norms and Accountable Governance (SNAG) project. She is also an honorary senior fellow of the Global EverGreening Alliance. From 2016–20, she was a technical adviser to the Permanent Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel and a Marie Curie research fellow at the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) in 2013–15. Her research focuses on Nigeria's political and social history; democracy, corruption and governance; cross-border cooperation and regional integration; and food security, trade and gender in West Africa.

Dr Raj Navanit Patel is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Pennsylvania and a core member of the Penn Center for Social Norms and Behavioural Dynamics. He is also a social norms adviser for the Chatham House Africa Programme's Social Norms and Accountable Governance (SNAG) project. His research focuses on normative issues surrounding the provision of public goods in Africa, South Asia and Latin America. He previously worked at the US Department of Homeland Security. He holds a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania and an MPhil from the University of Cambridge.

Acknowledgments

The authors are very grateful to our project partners in Nigeria, without whom the data on which this research is based would not exist.

Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) provided expertise, advice and training, and we would like to thank Dr Yemi Kale (statistician general), Tunde Adebisi, Biyi Fafunmi, Lola Talabi-Oni, Shamsudeen Lawal, Lucky Ogidan, Bridget Ebhodaghe and Peter Adanegbe. We are also very grateful to Rakiya Onize, David Kudevi, Okere Akujobi Uchegbulam, Abdulkadir Mohammed Sumda, Geoffrey A. Agu, Odey Timothy Ite, Odeh Gowon and Moses Sanda Dabai, the NBS field personnel who worked with our survey teams in the field to provide advice and help ensure the safe and smooth conduct of the survey.

We are thankful to our survey teams across Nigeria for their advice on the survey script and the translations, and for their hard work, commitment and dedication to ensuring quality research and data gathering, often in very difficult circumstances. We are grateful to our partners at:

- The Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension, Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola, Adamawa – with a survey team comprising Philomena Mathew Demshemino, Maryam Muhammad Jika, Abba Hakim Abubakar and Mark Polycarp, and led by Elizabeth Adebayo, professor of agricultural economics.

- The Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, Benue State University, Makurdi, Benue – with a survey team comprising Tough Benjamin Terzungwe, Dr Rhoda Dewua Ebi, Ingyer Mercy Mnguzamber and Dr Adole Raphael Audu, and led by Professor Euginia Member George-Genyi, Department of Political Science.
- The Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu – with a survey team comprising Ijeoma Igwe, Dr Elias Chukwuemeka Ngwu, Doris Ijeoma Okohu-Ajah, Chukwudi Christopher Nwokolo, and led by Dr Anthony Ajah, lecturer, Humanities Unit, School of General Studies.
- The NBS and the Anti-Corruption Academy of Nigeria (ACAN), FCT Abuja – with a survey team comprising Mark Faison, Yetunde Mosunmola, Ahmed Abdul and Akindele Ogunleye, and led by Rakiya Onize of the NBS.
- The Christopher Kolade Centre for Research in Leadership and Ethics (CRLE), Lagos Business School, Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos – with a survey team comprising Azeezat Ajibola, Chika Nwogu, Ibironke Ojesebholo and Nonso Malachy Anagboso, and led by Dr Kemi Ogunyemi, director CRLE and senior lecturer in business ethics, managerial anthropology and sustainability management.
- The Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers – with a survey team comprising Dr Aaron Anyanabia, Dr Adaku Ubelejit-Nte, Theophilus Akujobi and Dr Grace Udoyen, and led by Dr Chioma Daisy Onyige, senior lecturer, Department of Sociology.
- The Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto – with a survey team comprising Hauwakulu M. Dantake, Abubakar Jibril, Muhammad Shehu and Risikat Rufa'I, and led by Dr Sulaiman Y. Balarabe Kura, Department of Political Science.

The Social Norms and Accountable Governance (SNAG) project benefits greatly from the Chatham House partnership with the Center for Social Norms and Behavioural Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania and, in particular, from the involvement and expertise of Cristina Bicchieri, S. J. P. Harvie Professor of Social Thought and Comparative Ethics at the University of Pennsylvania.

The authors would also like to thank Elizabeth Donnelly, deputy director of the Africa Programme at Chatham House, for providing research guidance and editorial input; Justine Kavanagh, Fergus Kell and Tighisti Amare, of the Africa Programme, for logistic support, research assistance and field management of this project. Thanks also go to Vera Chapman Browne and Michael Tsang for their skilful editing of this work.

Chatham House would like to thank the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for their generous financial support for this project, and the Foundation’s On Nigeria programme team in Chicago and Abuja for their input and support.

About the Chatham House Africa Programme

The Africa Programme develops policy-oriented research on issues affecting individual states of Africa, their international relations and the continent as a whole. A reputation for independence and influence enables the Africa Programme research to impact on policy, in support of building a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world. Since its establishment in 2002, the Africa Programme has become a world-leading centre for independent policy research and debate on Africa's politics and socio-economic change. By working with the best international experts, the programme is a hub for thought-leadership on Africa, producing reliable analysis and disseminating findings globally through its convening power and extensive networks.

The Social Norms and Accountable Governance (SNAG) project, supported by the MacArthur Foundation's On Nigeria programme, seeks context-specific solutions to address collective problems like corruption, through an evidence-based understanding of the drivers that sustain these problems.

For more information, please contact:
Elizabeth Donnelly, Deputy Director and Research Fellow, Africa Programme,
Chatham House
T: +44 (0) 20 7314 3667
E: edonnelly@chathamhouse.org | @AfricaProg
https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments/africa-programme

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder. Please direct all enquiries to the publishers.

Chatham House does not express opinions of its own. The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s).

Copyright © The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2021
Cover image: A Muslim girl walks past a member of the Evangelical Christian Street Preachers Fellowship preaching on the road side in Lagos, Nigeria, on 19 September 2019.
Photo credit: Copyright © Olukayode Jaiyeola/NurPhoto/Getty Images

ISBN 978 1 78413 438 9

This publication is printed on FSC-certified paper.
designbysoapbox.com

Independent thinking since 1920

MacArthur Foundation

nbs

CENTER FOR
Social Norms and Behavioral Dynamics
University of Pennsylvania

Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is a world-leading policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help governments and societies build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.

CHATHAM HOUSE

The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700
contact@chathamhouse.org | chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223