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.
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.

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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.
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This paper presents analysis of the data to show whether religious purposes or benefits play a role in social evaluations of corrupt behaviour.

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 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. 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. It also establishes and legitimizes forms of social order by prescribing the norms, practices and behaviours that actuate shared identities. 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, 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

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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 Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2020 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/morality-definition.


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

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. 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

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 Ohadare, E. (2018), Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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. These social norms and pressures can provide a justification for, rather than criticism of, corrupt behaviour.

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. 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. 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, zakat 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.

**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. 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)
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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

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

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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#.
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

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 preference29 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.

27 Marquette (2011), ''Finding God' or 'Moral Disengagement' in the Fight Against Corruption in Developing Countries? Evidence from India and Nigeria', p. 4.
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.
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. 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.

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 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.*

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents who agree or disagree with the statement for personal benefit, by religion.](chart.png)

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

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.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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**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?

![Bar chart showing reasons for acceptability of corruption](chart1.png)

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.

![Bar chart showing acceptability across states](chart2.png)

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.*

![Acceptable for personal reasons (percentage of respondents)](image)

![Acceptable for religious reasons (percentage of respondents)](image)

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. 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

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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.
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.

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. Religion also encourages and rewards ‘loyalty and a tendency towards the acceptance of authority, both of which might undermine attempts to fight corruption’. 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.

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. 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. 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. Paradoxically, 64 per cent of those surveyed claimed to have some or a lot of trust in religious leaders, 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

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.
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or fluid, rather than fixed, moral and cultural phenomenon, 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.

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. Descriptions of behaviours and actions as ‘good’ or ‘evil’, ‘wicked’ or ‘virtuous’ are very commonly used in public discourse on corruption in Nigeria. 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.
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.
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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.

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