Lived Experiences of Corruption:
The Plebeians' Perspective

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The MacArthur Foundation-funded project on "Research Support for Corruption Control through Behavioural Change Approach is being undertaken by the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), as part of a cohort of grantees tackling corruption in Nigeria through behavioural change. NISER's role in the cohort is to provide empirical evidence for the need for a behavioural change solution for corruption control in selected public agencies in the country through understanding the concept of corrupt behaviours, the motivator-enabler-barrier nexus and hence a solution identification process. Thereafter, pilot behavioural change solutions would be carried out on identified corrupt behaviour in the selected agencies.

The *a priori* review and framework informed the structure of the first objective of the NISER study within the project – a large-scale citizen's survey for situating corruption within its social sense. This survey was conducted using the SenseMaker® methodology across selected states in the six geo-political zones and the federal capital territory. This nationwide survey is the first step in developing a behavioural change approach for corruption control in Nigeria to understand the underlying concepts, dimensions, and motivations for corrupt behaviour to provide the appropriate behavioural solution. The SenseMaker® survey was useful to collect stories from a very large respondent base and thereafter provides context to the stories through the signification process. Signification frameworks used in this survey were the Triads and Dyads. The triads, as the name implies is a three-dimensional frame that provides context to various dimensions of a phenomenon. The Dyads on the other hand, reflect polar responses, which however allows respondents to situate their experiences along the continuum.

The experience of citizens with regards to corruption was more tilted towards the Police force (28.09%), the educational sector (7.66%) and the health sector (7.42%). Within the shared experiences, the most dominant forms of corrupt practices were abuse of power (37%), bribery (25%), illegal accumulation of wealth (17%). These experiences were found to have evoked clearly negative feelings with Sadness (31.9%), Anger (28.95%), Disgust (16.19%) and Fear (9.73%) being prominent. However, there were some feelings of hope (2.43%), when the stories were related to public officials eschewing corrupt practices.

The perceptions of the impact of corruption by public institutions from the views of the citizens and the inability of the government to regulate such behaviours were clear. The most obvious impact of corruption was the breach of plebeians' confidence in the government (41.2%), disruption of the rule of law (26.3%), and weakening of the policy-making framework (13.1%).

One of the functions of the triad's signification framework enabled the study to provide definitional concept to the issue off corruption from the citizens' views. These definitions examined corruption in terms of its wrongness, the power dynamics in play, the ethical underpinning, the decision-making nexus, and the psychological motivation for corruption. Thus, corruption is defined as wrong because it went against law and order (38%); is more of a function of 'Power to' (i.e. abuse of function -46%), than 'Power over' (coercion) or 'Power with' (collusion). With regards to the ethical dimensions in corruption, there was a diversity with regards to the three dimensions of independence in decision-making," "Accountability," and "Fairness," however, the poll (28%) seemed tilted towards corruption as a loss of accountability within the system. Out of the three dimensions of psychological motivation for corruption-"Integrity", "Ethical standards", and "Calculation". The overwhelming response (41%) was that corruption is a matter of the calculating the balance between risks or rewards. This seems to relate to the individualistic sense of identify that fuel corruption (79%), even much more than Tribal or Social cohesion. Social relations explored corruption in terms of "Competitiveness", "Collaboration" and "Compromise"; the findings reveal that competitiveness (78%) is a driving force of corruption.
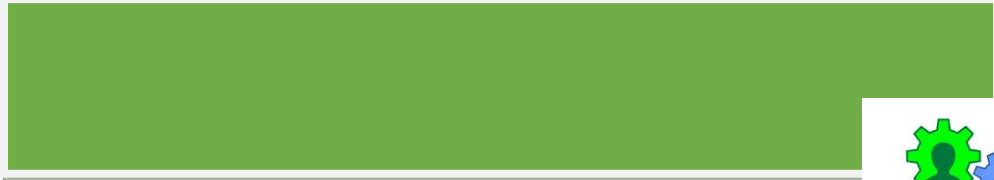
The other function of the triad's signification framework was to situate the concept of corruption within its appropriate context of its enablers and barriers. The ability to contextualize corruption would influence the solution of choice for a greater impact on society. In this regard, the study examined corruption as systemic versus individualistic, and thus pointers to where targeted interventions must be situated. The results showed that corruption is more systemic than individualistic, with a slight tilt towards both. Approximately40% believe that the responsibility for acting right lies within the ambit of the government, while 21% suggest that individuals and civil society should take the lead in eradicating corruption. Hence, the responsibility to change the narrative of corruption in Nigeria is largely that of the public institutions. To reduce the prevalence of corruption, 23% allude to better systems and structure, 22% support penalties for wrongdoing and 8% advocate clear rules and processes.

The Dyad signification on the other had allows responses to be situated in a continuum for which respondents are able to situate with regards to their experiences. The overwhelming response saw corruption as negative and unacceptable within the society. The dyads also examined the type of system in which corruption thrived. The tilt of the histogram revealed that corruption is mainly systemic in manifestation, with some indications of individual pull. Corruption was also seen to be driven by the need to conform to the modern Nigerian orientation rather than primordial or ethnic sentiments.

Possibilities of gender disaggregation of definitions, and conceptualisation of corruption were also explored. The findings revealed male and female collaborations and sometimes differences in opinions with regards to corruption and its control. Thus, while males regarded the institutionalisation of better systems and structures to control corruption, more females opted for the use of penalties. Also, while more males regarded the government to take responsibility for corruption control, females put the responsibility with the people/civil society. While men perceived that corruption was an outcome of calculated risk/reward nexus, females regarded it as a decision to do right or wrong. This also reflected in higher female proportion seeing corruption as being against the good of the people.

In conclusion, findings show the pervasiveness of corruption, its dependence on individual abuse of power and a weak system of accountability in public institutions. Thus, the impetus for leadership in corruption control les with the government in strengthening its institutions and enabling clear rules for decisive anti-corruption laws.