

# The Cost of Corruption in a Resource-Constrained Country: The Case of Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

Despite repeated reform efforts, corruption remains deeply entrenched across key institutions. Zimbabwe is now ranked 160 out of 180 in terms of the perceived levels of public sector corruption. Whilst the cost of corruption has remained un-assessed in most economic zones, Zimbabwe included, there is significant amount of evidence that suggests it has been widespread in most nations, including Zimbabwe. However, the consequences differ from one country to the other and from institution to institution. The cost of corruption in resource constrained environments, Zimbabwe has remained a grey area, unexplored and untheorised. Zimbabwe as a case remains a 'black box'. This study employed qualitative content analysis to assess the cost and impact of corruption in Zimbabwe. The study adopted a multi-theoretical framework encompassing Social Exchange Theory, Game Theory, White-Elephant Theory, and X-inefficiency Theory to adequately conceptualise the dynamics of corruption in Zimbabwe. These perspectives enable nuanced analysis of behavioural, institutional and structural dimensions of corruption. A purposive sample of 30 scholarly sources including peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and policy briefs from 2010 to 2024 was selected from academic databases and institutional platforms. Findings indicated that corruption eroded institutional accountability, exacerbated poverty and inequality, discouraged investment, undermined public services in health, education, infrastructure and natural resource sectors. Social cohesion was compromised, with rising public disillusionment and inequality in service access. The study concluded that corruption in Zimbabwe was multidimensional and pervasive, impeding national development goals. Addressing it required comprehensive reforms, including stronger transparency frameworks, independent oversight institutions, civic engagement and global cooperation on asset recovery. These measures were essential for restoring accountability, enhancing governance and achieving sustainable development. The study highlighted the need for further research into the psychosocial dimensions of corruption; how societal norms, expectations and historical injustices influenced corrupt behaviour.

**Keywords:** Corruption, Resource-constrained, Institutional Reform, Policy Intervention

## Introduction

Despite a plethora of institutional, legal and policy initiatives aimed at mitigating corruption, the scourge persists across both developed and developing nations. Africa, and particularly Zimbabwe, continues to face the debilitating consequences of corruption. The impact of corruption cannot be underestimated in Africa (Transparency International 2018). Several

studies, including those by Mungiu-Pippidi (2015), Zinyama (2021) and Transparency International (2023), document how corruption compromises social cohesion, undermines political stability, stalls economic development and erodes institutional integrity. Although much research has been undertaken on the causes and forms of corruption (Lukiko, 2024), the comprehensive cost, especially in resource-constrained environments like Zimbabwe, remains grossly underexplored. While anecdotal and sector-specific evidence is abundant (Mlambo et al., 2019–2024; Baum et al., 2019; Rappo, 2023), these do not sufficiently quantify or theorise corruption’s full economic, social and governance implications.

Corruption in Zimbabwe mirrors the broader African experience, manifesting in political patronage, public sector inefficiencies and misallocation of national resources. Globally, corruption is estimated to cost over US\$2.6 trillion annually (UNDP, 2022), with developing countries disproportionately affected. In Africa, Transparency International (2023) estimates that over US\$50 billion is siphoned annually through illicit means. In Zimbabwe, State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) have become emblematic of endemic corruption-riddled with nepotism, inflated procurement deals and embezzlement (Hedebe et al., 2015). According to Transparency International (2019), Zimbabwe, the country loses US\$1 billion annually to corruption. There is consensus that institutions for curbing corruption in many countries particularly in developing countries, Zimbabwe included have failed to measure up to policy-set targets (see Zinyama, 2018; Transparency International 2018; Lodge, 2019). The Marange diamond fields, valued at over US\$2 billion in annual revenue, have yielded little public benefit, with proceeds allegedly diverted by elites (Kwenda, 2021; Muguchu, 2018).

Numerous high-profile corruption scandals such as the War Victims Compensation Fund, ZISCO steel (US\$500 000 in 2005), Indigenisation Funds, and the Reserve Bank Agricultural Farm Mechanisation Programme (US\$200 million in 2007), Command Agriculture (US\$3 million in 2016), National Social Security Authority (US\$90 million in 2019), Drax International LLC (US\$60 million in 2020), COTTCO (US\$5 million in 2022) have exposed the systemic nature of corruption in Zimbabwe (Mlambo et al., 2023; Oladipo, 2016). Such patterns are corroborated by international indices, with Zimbabwe consistently scoring below 30 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023). Furthermore, corruption has exacerbated poverty and inequality, public service delivery has deteriorated dramatically due to graft, especially in education, health and infrastructure (Zinyama, 2018).

Despite a growing body of research on governance and corruption, few studies delve into the aggregate cost of corruption across sectors. The dominant focus on either SOEs or anti-corruption frameworks has left a vacuum in understanding the holistic economic, social and institutional burdens corruption imposes on resource-strained economies like Zimbabwe (Zinyama, 2021; Chiduku, 2021). This study addresses that void by synthesising qualitative evidence to appraise corruption’s systemic and multidimensional impact in Zimbabwe.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative content analysis to assess the cost of corruption in a resource-constrained environment, with Zimbabwe as the primary case study. The study population comprised 30 peer-reviewed academic articles, government and institutional reports, policy briefs and official publications that focus on corruption and development in Africa, with specific attention to Zimbabwe. This number is commensurate with content analysis (Nueundorf et al., 2016; Kripperndorff, 2018). Documents were retrieved from academic databases and institutional websites to ensure breadth and rigor. Online databases included

Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus and SpringerLink whilst institutional and government sources included: Transparency International (2021–2023 Reports), UNDP (2022–2023 Human Development and Anti-Corruption Reports), World Bank (2021–2023 Worldwide Governance Indicators, Public Sector Management Notes), African Development Bank (2022 African Economic Outlook) and Government of Zimbabwe (Auditor General Reports, National Budget Reviews).

This research employed both manifest content analysis, examining visible and countable content such as frequency of corruption-related terms and latent content analysis, which interprets underlying meanings linked to political instability, governance breakdown and social injustice. This dual approach captures both empirical evidence and discursive narratives from the selected documents (Transparency International, 2023). The researcher used themes as a unit of analysis. The results and discussion of the findings are presented below.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of this study, derived from thematic qualitative content analysis of 30 documents, revealed significant and multifaceted consequences of corruption in Zimbabwe. These are discussed under five overarching themes: Impact on Governance, Economic Consequences of Corruption, Social Effects of Corruption, Corruption and Infrastructure Development, Corruption in Natural Resource Management and Corruption and Foreign Aid. Each theme presents evidence-supported insights and Zimbabwe-specific implications.

### **Impact on Governance**

**Erosion of Trust in Government.** Evidence from the study highlight that corruption has severely undermined public trust in government institutions. Corruption in Zimbabwe has significantly eroded citizens' faith in political leadership (Transparency International, 2023). Studies indicate that nearly 70% of Zimbabweans believe that most or all government officials are corrupt (Afrobarometer, 2022). The collapse in public trust has hampered government legitimacy and reduced citizen participation in democratic processes such as voting, policy engagement and social accountability. As a result, Zimbabwe's political landscape has been marked by widespread demonstrations against corruption. Notable cases include the Tajamuka movement, which led protests in 2016 and 2017, demanding accountability and transparency from the government. Another significant demonstration was in 2019, organised by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), calling for an end to corruption and the implementation of economic reforms. These protests, though often met with repression, illustrate the growing public dissatisfaction with corrupt practices and the demand for good governance in Zimbabwe.

**Weakening of Democratic Institutions.** Study findings from the synthesis of literature highlights that persistent corruption has weakened democratic institutions by eroding the rule of law and enabling elite dominance. Zimbabwe's judiciary and anti-corruption bodies are frequently accused of bias and selective prosecution, resulting in a justice system that favours the politically connected (Zinyama, 2021). Political corruption in electoral commissions has also cast doubt on the fairness of national elections. These institutional weaknesses have threatened democratic consolidation and opened avenues for authoritarian tendencies. This deterioration of democratic principles continues corrupt behaviours and obstructs general development pathways.

**Impediment to Rule of Law.** Evidence from the synthesis of literature highlights that corruption has rendered the rule of law redundant. The rule of law in Zimbabwe has been seriously compromised by corruption, particularly within law enforcement and the judiciary. Bribery, case tampering and politically motivated judgments have become common. The 2022 Auditor General Report highlights systemic failures in compliance and oversight mechanisms in public service delivery (UNDP, 2022). Furthermore, the widespread corruption in Zimbabwe has created an environment where citizens have lost trust in the legal system and its ability to provide justice. With the judicial system often compromised, ordinary citizens have been left vulnerable to exploitation, while businesses face uncertainties due to inconsistent and unfair legal rulings. As corruption continues to flourish, it has diminished the public's faith in both the legal system and the government, thereby destabilising Zimbabwe's legal and democratic institutions (also see Moyo, 2016). Without a functioning rule of law, the country has struggled to achieve sustainable development and social justice (Akem, 2023; Ogwola, 2021).

### **Economic Consequences of Corruption**

**Drain on National Resources.** Evidence from the study findings suggest that corruption has led to enormous losses in public revenue. In Zimbabwe, it is estimated that over US\$1 billion is lost annually through corruption (Transparency International, 2022). The 2021 report from Zimbabwe's Auditor General documented unauthorised expenditures, double payments, and lack of documentation in procurement processes across ministries. These leakages have diverted funds from crucial sectors such as health, education and agriculture, impeding national development.

**Disruption of Market Mechanisms.** Zimbabwe's market economy has become distorted by rent-seeking behaviour and favouritism in business regulation. Evidence highlight that licenses and tenders are often awarded based on bribes rather than merit, deterring honest businesses and investors. Echoing similar sentiments, the World Bank (2023), the informal sector now accounts for over 60% of economic activity in Zimbabwe, driven in part by mistrust in formal institutions. This has undermined tax collection and hindered economic formalisation.

**Inequality and Poverty.** Corruption has exacerbated income inequality and entrenched poverty in Zimbabwe. Public services are often allocated based on political allegiance rather than need, disproportionately disadvantaging rural and marginalised populations (Mlambo et al., 2023). Moreover, funds earmarked for poverty reduction are frequently misappropriated. The findings are also echoed by the UNDP (2022) which argues that countries with high levels of corruption spend significantly less on pro-poor policies, reinforcing the poverty trap.

### **Social Effects of Corruption**

**Undermining Social Cohesion.** Corruption erodes the social fabric by fostering perceptions of injustice and inequality. In Zimbabwe, widespread nepotism and cronyism in hiring and resource allocation have fuelled ethnic and regional resentment. These practices have alienated disadvantaged communities, reduced national solidarity and fuelled intergroup tensions (Afrobarometer, 2022).

**Impeding Human Development.** Corruption in Zimbabwe's health and education sectors has significantly reduced service quality and access. A 2021 UNDP study noted that bribes were commonly required to access hospital beds, medicines and even school placements. This denies

citizens, particularly the poor, basic human rights and undermines human capital development (World Bank, 2023).

**Fostering Social Unrest.** Public outrage against corruption has increasingly manifested in protests and civil disobedience. Movements such as #ThisFlag and #ZimShutDown have mobilised citizens against perceived elite impunity. The government's violent suppression of these movements has further delegitimised its authority, escalating tensions. Transparency International (2022) warns that continued impunity could provoke long-term civil instability.

## **Corruption and Infrastructure Development**

**Diversion of Funds from Infrastructure Projects.** Public infrastructure development has suffered immensely from misappropriation of project funds. Major projects, such as the Beitbridge-Harare-Chirundu Highway, have experienced years of delay and substandard construction due to corrupt procurement practices (Mlambo et al., 2023). The 2022 National Budget Review revealed massive cost inflation in public works, attributed to tender manipulation and lack of oversight.

**Substandard Infrastructure due to Corruption.** Where infrastructure is built, it is often substandard. Reports from the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) indicate that building materials are frequently substituted with cheaper alternatives after contracts are awarded, compromising structural integrity. Schools, clinics and roads deteriorate quickly, costing the public twice first in funds and again in lost functionality (Zinyama, 2021).

**Impact on Public Services.** Public service delivery has collapsed in many sectors due to corruption. Local authorities have been particularly affected, with widespread misuse of ratepayer funds. Garbage collection, water provision and road maintenance are erratic or non-existent. This has forced many urban residents to resort to private alternatives, creating dual service systems that deepen inequality (Afrobarometer, 2022).

## **Corruption in Natural Resource Management**

**Resource Plundering.** Zimbabwe's mineral wealth has been grossly mismanaged due to corruption. The Marange diamond fields, once expected to transform the economy, have instead become symbols of elite exploitation. Billions in diamond revenue remain unaccounted for, with only a fraction reaching public coffers (Kwenda, 2021). This mismanagement has fuelled perceptions of injustice and international criticism.

**Environmental Degradation.** Corrupt land and mining allocations have contributed to deforestation, pollution and biodiversity loss. Illegal mining operations often operate with political protection, flouting environmental regulations. UNDP (2022) highlights that environmental oversight agencies in Zimbabwe are underfunded and subject to political interference, allowing environmentally destructive activities to continue unchecked.

**Loss of Revenue for Development.** Natural resource corruption results in the loss of substantial fiscal revenue. A 2021 report by the African Development Bank noted that poor governance in the extractive sector costs Zimbabwe millions annually in lost taxes and royalties. These funds could otherwise be directed towards education, health and infrastructure development.

## **Corruption and Foreign Aid**

**Mismanagement of Aid Funds.** Foreign aid flows are frequently diverted by corrupt officials. Donors have expressed concern over the lack of transparency in aid utilisation, particularly in humanitarian and development assistance programmes. The Global Fund suspended funding in 2021 due to misappropriation risks. This has affected Zimbabwe's ability to finance critical sectors such as health and HIV/AIDS treatment.

**Impact on Investment Climate.** Corruption has significantly deterred both domestic and foreign investment. Investors have become wary of opaque regulatory frameworks, inconsistent policy application, and the prevalence of bribes. Zimbabwe ranks poorly in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, largely due to governance concerns (World Bank, 2023). The risk perception associated with corruption restricts capital inflows and innovation.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study's findings present a sobering portrayal of the extent and depth of corruption's impact on governance, economic growth, social well-being, infrastructure development, natural resource management and international cooperation. Corruption in Zimbabwe is not a standalone problem but a pervasive system that erodes governance, distorts economic functioning, impairs social well-being, undermines infrastructure development, exploits natural resources and deters foreign engagement. These thematic dimensions are not isolated; rather, they interlock to form a systemic crisis that continues to erode the prospects for sustainable development in Zimbabwe. Corruption in Zimbabwe has resulted in significant governance deficits, including the erosion of public trust, weakening of democratic institutions and consistent breaches of the rule of law. Politically exposed individuals often escape justice, while oversight institutions lack the autonomy and capacity to hold elites accountable. This undermines not only the functionality of state institutions but also the broader democratic ethos that underpins citizen engagement and peaceful civic participation. Addressing corruption is not merely a governance issue; it is a prerequisite for national renewal, socioeconomic transformation and sustainable development.

This study proposes a comprehensive reform package rooted in best practices, international frameworks and Zimbabwean realities to address these challenges. The recommendations are categorised under six strategic areas:

### **Strengthening Transparency and Accountability Frameworks**

- Introduce mandatory public disclosure of assets and interests for senior public officials, including legislators, ministers and heads of state-owned enterprises.
- Establish open contracting systems to digitise and make all public procurement data accessible to the public.
- Enforce annual publication of audited government financial statements to foster fiscal discipline.
- Institutionalise performance-based budgeting and results-based management across ministries and departments.

### **Legal and Institutional Reforms**

- Revise and harmonise anti-corruption laws to close loopholes and strengthen prosecutorial powers.

- Guarantee the independence and resourcing of oversight institutions like the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC), Auditor General, and Parliament's Public Accounts Committee.
- Create specialised anti-corruption courts to expedite cases and build jurisprudence around economic crimes.
- Strengthen whistleblower protection legislation to safeguard citizens and public servants who report corruption.

### **Enhancing Civic Engagement and Public Participation**

- Expand civic education on rights, corruption reporting mechanisms and social accountability tools.
- Facilitate community scorecards and citizen report cards to assess the performance of service delivery institutions.
- Support grassroots civil society organisations that monitor budget implementation and local development projects.
- Promote investigative journalism through training, funding and legal protections.

### **Digitalisation and Technological Innovations**

- Deploy e-governance platforms to digitise government transactions, licenses, permits and tax administration.
- Use blockchain technology to secure land registries, tender systems and public resource tracking.
- Integrate artificial intelligence and data analytics to detect fraud patterns and trigger audits.
- Establish anonymous digital platforms for reporting corruption and monitoring public projects.

### **International Cooperation and Asset Recovery**

- Enhance cooperation with the African Union Advisory Board on Corruption and the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) to access investigative and legal tools.
- Join international asset recovery forums such as the Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR) to reclaim stolen funds.
- Negotiate mutual legal assistance treaties to facilitate extradition, prosecution and asset repatriation of fugitives.
- Collaborate with financial intelligence units in tracking illicit financial flows and beneficial ownership transparency.

### **Targeted Sectoral Interventions**

- In the health sector: Develop transparent procurement portals for medical equipment and pharmaceuticals.
- In education: Audit recruitment and resource allocation systems to eliminate ghost teachers and misallocation of resources.
- In local government: Decentralise auditing powers and enforce community participation in development budgeting.
- In extractive industries: Implement the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and strengthen environmental compliance monitoring.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks**

- Develop national anti-corruption indicators aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16.
- Institutionalise annual corruption perception surveys by independent entities.
- Track policy implementation through real-time dashboards integrated with government planning systems.

Tackling corruption in Zimbabwe is not an event but a sustained process requiring political will, societal consensus and international support. The current costs of inaction are too high, manifesting in lost lives, collapsed infrastructure, entrenched poverty and stunted development. A holistic anti-corruption agenda offers a pathway not only toward improved governance but toward shared prosperity, social justice and a more inclusive future for all Zimbabweans. The recommendations advanced here, if pursued with urgency and commitment, can restore public trust, unlock development finance and rebuild the state's legitimacy from the ground up.

## **Implications of the study**

This study has generated valuable insights into the systemic nature of corruption in Zimbabwe and its multifaceted impact on governance, economic development, social equity, infrastructure and natural resource management. As such, the findings hold significant implications for policymaking, public and private sector operations and the broader academic discourse on corruption and development in resource-constrained environments.

## **Implications for Policy Formulation and Governance**

One of the most direct implications of this study is the need for a paradigmatic shift in public policy and governance frameworks in Zimbabwe. The evidence presented reveals that corruption is deeply embedded in public institutions, affecting service delivery, fiscal management and the rule of law. This necessitates a re-evaluation of existing policy instruments to ensure they are not only theoretically sound but also practically enforceable. The findings also highlight the importance of policy coherence. Anti-corruption measures should not be implemented in isolation but embedded within broader national development strategies. This requires harmonisation across sectors such as finance, justice, local government and natural resources. Policies should include measurable targets and be subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation. Further, findings advocate for decentralisation in policy execution. Local governments and municipalities, the frontline of service delivery, must be equipped with the resources, authority and accountability mechanisms necessary to combat corruption at the grassroots level. This implies revisiting fiscal devolution frameworks and empowering provincial anti-corruption bodies. The study suggests that corruption cannot be tackled solely through punitive measures. While enforcement is crucial, policies must also address the structural incentives that sustain corrupt behaviour. This includes reforming public sector wages, instituting meritocratic hiring systems and reducing regulatory red tape that breeds rent-seeking.

## **Implications for Industry and the Public Sector**

The study offers a stark warning: unchecked corruption is not only a moral failing but a business risk for both industry and public sector institutions. Zimbabwe's corruption-laden economic environment has led to inefficiency in the allocation of resources, inflated project costs and reduced investor confidence. Industries particularly those reliant on government



contracts, public infrastructure, or natural resources must recognise the importance of integrity in sustaining profitability and legitimacy. The findings also call for greater collaboration between business and civil society in fostering corporate governance. Industry associations can play a leading role by adopting anti-corruption codes of conduct, advocating for transparent policy environments and supporting third-party audits. Moreover, firms can support integrity education and awareness campaigns for their staff and supply chain partners. For the public sector, the results demand a transformation in leadership ethics and institutional culture. The entrenchment of impunity and patronage in SOEs and ministries must be reversed. This will require a sustained effort to professionalise the civil service, build internal compliance systems and incentivise performance through service charters and transparent key performance indicators (KPIs).

### **Implications for the Body of Knowledge**

From an academic standpoint, the study contributes to filling the conceptual and empirical void surrounding the cost of corruption in resource-constrained countries. While existing literature has extensively covered the causes and typologies of corruption, few studies have engaged in a holistic assessment of its cross-sectoral impact, especially within African states like Zimbabwe. This study's framework organising findings into thematic domains such as governance, economy, social equity, infrastructure and international cooperation provides a replicable model for future comparative research.

The study also adds to theory-building efforts in governance and development studies. The integration of multiple theoretical lenses demonstrates how interdisciplinary approaches can illuminate the complex, multi-causal nature of corruption. This opens avenues for theory testing and refinement in subsequent research.

Moreover, the methodological use of qualitative content analysis across a diverse pool of literature sets a precedent for non-statistical inquiry into corruption's effects. In contexts where empirical data may be inaccessible or unreliable due to institutional opacity, this approach offers a credible alternative for researchers and evaluators. The study also contributes to discourse on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). By identifying corruption as both a cause and symptom of weak institutions, the research underscores the need to treat anti-corruption not as an ancillary concern, but as central to sustainable development. This re-orient the academic community to examine corruption not merely as a governance challenge, but as a development imperative.

The implications of this study are broad and consequential. For policymakers, it offers a compelling evidence base to recalibrate governance and anti-corruption strategies. For industry and the public sector, it presents a clarion call to operationalise integrity as a cornerstone of sustainable operations. For scholars, it enriches the conceptual and methodological toolkit available to interrogate corruption in under-researched settings. By weaving these dimensions together, the study reaffirms that tackling corruption is not just a legal or institutional necessity, but a foundational requirement for Zimbabwe's developmental future.

### **Areas for further research**

The study highlights the need for further research into the psychosocial dimensions of corruption how societal norms, expectations and historical injustices influence corrupt behaviour. Investigating the cultural acceptability of corruption and public attitudes toward

whistleblowers, for instance, would enrich understanding and shape more targeted interventions.

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