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Corruption in the SADC region: Experiences and the role of youth in leadership

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Abstract

The African continent continues to suffer serious developmental challenges since the 2008 global financial crisis. Recently, the global pandemic also disrupted the continent, worsening unemployment and poverty. Despite all this, African youth have remained resilient, especially in their entrepreneurial ambitions and their willingness to develop the continent. However, their perceptions about their countries have been declining over time. African youth are now less optimistic, and they have developed a lack of trust in their leaders because of rampant corruption and lack of accountability. Given the above, the objective of this study was to understand the experiences of the youth with corruption and their role in combating it. To achieve the above, the study gathered data from youth in leadership across the countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) using an online questionnaire that was distributed via email. Some of our key findings are that 67.9% of the respondents have been asked to pay a bribe at some point by public officials in their countries, 25% regretted not paying a bribe and 39.3% initiated to pay a bribe themselves. Looking at those who paid bribes, 75% were paying to get a service or to speed up the process of getting a service they rightfully can get from the government departments for free. Lastly, 46,4% of the sampled youth do not believe that corruption will ever end in their home countries.

Keywords: Youth, Corruption, Government, Development, Bribe

Introduction

This paper discusses the role of youth in leadership on corruption in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). However, corruption is not an issue that only the SADC region has struggled with but it's a global phenomenon (Kuznetsova 2023). In a much as it is an issue every country is grappling with; corruption is an impediment towards economic growth and development (Dokas et al., 2023; Mirzaakhmedov 2023). It also undermines democracy and good governance as resources that are supposed to benefit the broader majority will end up enriching one family or a small group of powerful people in a village, constituency, province, or the entire country (Oliinyk, Sierova & Huliaieva 2023).

According to Transparency International (TI), corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain in both the public and private sector. TI ranks countries according to the perception of corruption in the public sector using data collected through surveys and expert assessments. In its recent report, TI ranked Botswana as the least corrupt country in the SDC region with a score of 63 followed by Seychelles, Mauritius and Namibia who share the same score (53). The remaining countries in the region rank below the corruption index score of 50 as South Africa and Namibia share 44 as their corruption perception index scores whilst Zambia follows with a score index of 38.

According to the TI's corruption perception index, Zimbabwe and Angola were ranked as the most corrupt countries in the region with index scores of 21 and 15 respectively.

Looking at the rankings by Transparency International (TI), countries in the SADC region are dismally performing in their efforts to fight corruption. However, all countries in the region have set up different types of anti-corruption bodies or campaigns but all them seem not to be working (Mahuni et al., 2020). Sentiments from Dingake (2020) were that probably one of the reasons why it is proving to be difficult to have a corrupt-free SADC region is that corruption and illicit money fund elections, buy votes or impose political figures who will serve the purpose of the funders, not the general citizens or public. A report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2019), however, differed from Dingake (2020) in the sense that the UNECA report found non-performing economies, poor governance, weak institutions and abuse of political power as key drivers of corruption in the SADC region. Additionally, UNECA also found failing moral fabrics in the region as one of the drivers for corruption.

Due to the decay in the moral fabric in the region and the World, the youth are the only hope left in the effort to fight corruption. According to Sihombing (2018), attitudes towards the fight against corruption and the importance of understanding integrity need to be instilled from a young age. However, not much research has been done in the SADC region to understand the experiences of the youth and what they see as their role in the fight against corruption. This paper becomes the first to make that attempt through interviews that were carried out through an online question with young people in leadership across the SADC region.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows; section 2 focuses on the empirical literature review section followed by section 3, which discusses the paper's methodological aspects. After the methodology, section 4 presents and discusses the results and lastly, section 5 provides concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

The educational

Corruption hampers the development of young people in the SADC region and the entire continent (Ngqambela 2020). Corruption erodes the trust that citizens have in the public sector to act in their best interest. To add, corruption squanders the taxes that would have been earmarked for crucial development projects for infrastructure, education, economic advancement and activities for the youth through education and entrepreneurship opportunities. Further, it also disrupts the smooth delivery of basic services to local communities (Ngqambela 2020). As the continent struggles with low economic growth and poverty, Adjor and Kebalo (2018) argued that corruption takes away the aspirations of young people who want to venture into business, entrepreneurship, or thought leadership, as corrupt people enrich their lives through flawed tender processes and other irregularities.

Further, the employment prospects of many young people across the region and the continent are hampered by corruption and they do not access all the necessary basic services they need because of it. According to Corruption Watch (2021), most countries in Africa are suffering from a leadership crisis causing situations where politicians and government administrators serve their personal or private interests. This corruption in the public sector discourages competence and that further compromises a country in many ways including a slowdown in economic development where poverty and unemployment rise (Saha and Sen 2023; Peterson 2022). Among the most affected by public corruption are the youth as evidenced by the high rates of youth unemployment in the SADC region and all the corrupt government across the globe (Bouزيد 2016).

To add, the most frightening thing about public corruption on top of its contribution to nation regression is that it is difficult to uproot if it gets a chance to occupy the judiciary. According to Ades and Di Tellas (1997), corruption is worse and more difficult to uproot in countries with weak or corrupt judiciary. This is true because the judiciary is the last resort of any society. If that arm of the state is corrupted, then citizens and other stakeholders will not have anywhere to go and report any corruption-related crimes and the consequences of rampant maladministration, procurement corruption, fraud and misappropriation of funds among other things (Peterson 2022). All the consequences mentioned above lead to poor economic growth, poverty and underdevelopment in all walks of an economy. In support of that notion, Bouزيد (2016) found a positive relationship between corruption and youth unemployment. The author argued that the countries with very high youth unemployment are very corrupt. That was also supported by Peterson (2022) in the context of South Africa.

In as much as the youth are cited to be the most affected by the consequences of public corruption, Peterson (2022) believes that they are themselves the most effective weapon against corruption. He further laments that if you manage to make young people understand the consequences of corruption, that can change the attitude of generations to come. Corruption is caused by greed, ethical bankruptcy, weak civil participation and low levels of political transparency among other things (Sihombing 2018). As a result, if all stakeholders make the youth develop

strong character especially morals and ethics, they can hold leaders accountable as well as serve the public first before they serve themselves which is the opposite of what is observed in most corrupt countries.

Looking regionally in the SADC area, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa stated that corruption has so far cost the country around R1-trillion (Buthelezi 2021). That is a staggering amount of money that could have made a positive impact on the lives of millions of young people across the country (Buthelezi 2021). Due to corruption, the country's public enterprises are struggling to operate. The national airline, South Africa Airways was run down to the ground to a point where it went broke (khoza 2022). However, the national power utility ESKOM has been surviving on treasury bail-out to continue operations due to looting. Many municipalities in the country have not passed their audits meaning there is gross embezzlement of public funds impacting the service delivery mandate of the very municipalities. The consequences of such rampant corruption have seen service delivery protests which have become a daily scene in the media.

Looking at SADC in its breadth and width, corruption is rampant except for Botswana which has scored good points as far as the transparency International's surveys are concerned. According to Dingake (2020), the judiciary is one of the government arms of governments that should play a huge role in fighting corruption. A judiciary that is independent and impartial is the bedrock of democracy and the rule of law and is the last line of defense against any infringements on rights and freedoms under the law. About the African Integrity Indicators, the continent is making strides, although slowly, on judicial independence. However, to root out corruption significantly also warrants an enabling legal framework, which most Southern African Development Community countries don't have (Dingake 2020).

Further on the region, a report by the SADC Parliamentary Forum Standing Committee on Democratisation, Governance and Human Rights meeting on 26 October 2020 stated that social costs of corruption are incalculable and incontestable. It further went on to say that corruption is robbing the SADC region and at large the entire African continent of its future. As the continent continues to suffer the effects of corruption, the likes of Dingake pins hopes on the judiciary to intervene and bring accountability. However, looking at the findings of the Global Integrity report, out of the 54 African countries surveyed, only a paltry of 11% was found to have completely independent judiciary, while 30% was regarded as not completely independent. The only countries that were found to be doing completely well were Botswana, Cape Verde, Mauritius and South Africa. That is only 2 countries from the SADC region with chances to effectively fight corruption. In as much as this may be true, evidence from Transparency International proves that judiciary independence alone is not sufficient since South Africa is still ranked as a country suffering from significant growth. That may suggest that political will to fight corruption is another requirement countries need to fight corruption (Maduku and Osehi 2018).

Corruption and development in Africa

Since the African colonies started gaining independence, Africa has garnered significant attention due to its pervasive corruption. Despite Africa's abundant natural and human resources, it is one of the most impoverished and underdeveloped regions globally. In recent decades, African nations have seen significant economic and social changes (Gouvea, Li, & Vora, 2019). According to Shume (2022), corruption was not a significant issue in Africa before colonialism. After gaining independence, African nations inherited institutions and laws plagued by rampant corruption. Once again, African military officers who attained positions of authority refused to accept the judicial systems and processes of checks and balances that were established during the colonial era. Since gaining independence, the political and social institutions, including the courts, police, security services, and the media, have purportedly demonstrated opposition to corruption (Shume, 2022). Corruption has affected Africa's economic, political, and social progress. Corruption diminishes private investment and the efficiency of current resources exacerbates income inequalities, decreases foreign direct investment, reduces domestic tax revenue, and raises government expenditure. Corruption at a political level erodes democracy, undermines the legitimacy of the administration, and sullies the continent's reputation in the eyes of the international community (Hanson, 2009). Corruption in Africa encompasses a wide spectrum, from large-scale political corruption involving millions of dollars to small-scale bribes given to police officers or customs officials. Although political corruption incurs significant financial expenses for a nation, small-scale bribes harm fundamental institutions and erode public confidence in the government (Hanson, 2009). According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2016), corruption is a significant obstacle to structural transformation in Africa due to its association with poor governance and weak institutions (Dulani, Asiamah, Zindikirani, 2023). However, according to Pillay and Jones (2020), corruption is not limited to Africa; it is a worldwide phenomenon. Corruption is present in every continent, government, and society. Despite the widespread corruption and lack of accountability, other countries in other continents continue to progress and succeed economically, politically, scientifically, and socially. They continue to thrive and develop their civilizations, technologies, sciences, and economies for the benefit of their population

(Pillay and Jones, 2020). The malicious misappropriation of public resources in African states indicates a political and moral crisis. Upon careful analysis of the democratic state structure in African countries, it becomes evident that while the design of the African neo-colonial state is flawed, the main hindrance resides in corrupt and exploitative political and bureaucratic leadership. While some African states are transitioning towards democratic governance, this transition is often superficial and lacks substantial change (Pillay and Jones, 2020). Over time, it has been noted that consecutive political leaders are the main catalysts for ineffective governance, triggering the origin of pervasive, endemic, and systemic corruption. As shown in numerous African nations, the presidents and their associates have assumed absolute authority. Mlambo, Mubecua & Mlambo (2023) argue that the colonial education system profoundly influenced the development of colonial chiefs, colonial appointees, and other members of the elite. These colonial chiefs got accustomed to exercising absolute control without any judicial limitations as long as they had the complete support of the colonial master(s). These colonial methods established a system of favouritism, dictatorial rule, and self-centeredness, ultimately instructing African elites to prioritize personal gain and unconstrained authority. Throughout the colonial era, crucial establishments that were meant to function as monitors of corruption, such as the police, court, the rule of law, and security services, exhibited a biased inclination towards the interests of the privileged classes (Mlambo, Mubecua & Mlambo, 2023).

Corruption and development in the SADC

Corruption persists in causing substantial harm to the economic and social progress of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region while eroding openness, accountability, and the rule of law. Corruption can jeopardize the peace and stability of SADC Member States and worsen disparities by causing an uneven income distribution and hindering Member States' ability to provide fair socio-economic growth, compromising the well-being of all citizens. Els (2023) asserts that the state of organized crime inside the Southern African Development Community (SADC) appears to be deteriorating. The region's porous borders, inadequate governance, and developmental shortcomings render it susceptible to drug trafficking, arms smuggling, people and wildlife trafficking, as well as financial crimes. Extremist groups thrive in environments characterized by political instability, inadequate government service provision, and socio-economic marginalization. Organized crime and terrorism are closely linked due to their shared utilization of similar strategies, such as obtaining financial support and resources from local sources and capitalizing on each other's illegal operations and networks. The presence of terrorism in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and northern Mozambique is highly alarming, leading to severe humanitarian disasters (Els, 2023).

Although the increase in corruption cases in the SADC region has caught the attention of lawmakers, the SADC does have a framework in place to deal with these problems. Corruption within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) manifests in several forms, encompassing minor and more significant corruption cases. Corruption is prevalent in various areas, such as contract allocation, staff advancement, judicial proceedings, abuse of public positions and privileges, misappropriation of public funds, and manipulation of official records, publications, papers, valuable assets, and financial accounts (Bonga, Chiminya and Mudzingiri, 2015). Petty corruption manifests itself through practices such as nepotism, favouritism, racism, and religious discrimination, among others. Its widespread existence harms society since it hampers cultural development and impedes the fair distribution of resources. Grand corruption, the most perilous form, encompasses activities such as embezzlement and fraud, often involving substantial amounts of money. Grand corruption is typically associated with politics, making it exceedingly challenging to combat effectively. Grand corruption is a significant obstacle to economic progress, as it entails networks that effectively cripple governmental institutions, including the legal sector, to the point that wrongdoers can escape punishment. States with weak institutions that lack autonomy from politics often experience widespread grand corruption (Bonga, 2021).

Nonetheless, the Centre for Corporate Governance in Africa at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) contended that the poll underscores the reciprocal relationship between conflict and corruption, suggesting that abundant natural resources in certain nations may be perceived as a detriment. This is because they attract intermittent violence and political turmoil, which further worsens the negative cycle caused by corruption, poverty, disease, and ineffective administration (Malan, 2015). The primary objective of the SADC Protocol Against Corruption is to enhance and fortify the establishment of procedures in each Member State that are necessary for the prevention, detection, punishment, and elimination of corruption in both the public and private sectors. The Protocol aims to promote and regulate collaboration among Member States in addressing corruption issues while promoting the development and alignment of policies and domestic laws related to corruption. It clearly defines "acts of corruption," preventive measures, the jurisdiction of Member States, and procedures for extradition. The document provides a detailed description of the institutional framework for implementing this protocol. Nevertheless, according to Whittle (2024), certain public institutions in the sub-region are experiencing subpar

performance, and corruption is widespread. This can be partially ascribed to inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, highlighting the necessity for results-oriented management and responsible provision of services in public sector management systems.

Youth and fighting corruption: Challenges and prospects

According to Accountability lab (2024), young people contribute unique viewpoints, creative concepts, and inexhaustible enthusiasm to the battle against corruption. Their involvement shapes future generations and helps them understand how systems work, preparing them for leadership roles. Every individual must actively oppose corruption, beginning with themselves and extending to their households, religious establishments, educational institutions, and the broader society (Fayad 2023). Inaction will sustain the cycle of corruption, impeding the advancement of the nation and enabling the dominance of avarice and self-interest. According to Transparency International (2009), young people have the potential to play a crucial role in combating corruption. They are generally more receptive to large-scale socio-political changes and have less personal stake in preserving existing affairs (Transparency International 2009). Young people are crucial for achieving a cultural shift in attitudes and behaviour towards corruption and in forming future ideals since they embody the future of their nations. Within the SADC region, young individuals are currently confronted with various challenges. These challenges encompass unemployment, restricted access to social services like education and health, marginalization, poverty, hunger, and detrimental cultural and religious practices that negatively impact the youth.

Additionally, there is a pressing need for the region to effectively utilize the untapped potential of its youth population to stimulate development and growth. According to Ngwira (2017), the youth must combat corruption to overcome the existing difficulties and protect their future. Establishing and endorsing anti-corruption clubs in educational institutions and local communities is among the ways young individuals can actively engage. The clubs promote awareness about the pernicious effects of corruption through discussions and sensitization sessions. They allow young people to articulate their views on the subject. The church, civil society, and other socializing agents have a moral responsibility to instill ethical qualities such as integrity, loyalty, honesty, and accountability in young people. To become honest future leaders, young people must demonstrate a genuine interest in matters about democratic governance, such as accountability, transparency, and integrity (Ngwira, 2017). Young individuals can also harness the widespread use of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and other social media platforms to actively participate in anti-corruption endeavours. Young people possess extensive Internet and social media access, which unites them as a formidable catalyst for societal transformation. They can use social media platforms to learn about corruption and exchange ideas on strategies to prevent and oppose it.

Method

Data issues and sampling

The current paper utilized survey data from young people in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) who are involved in varied leadership responsibilities and positions in the communities, in government, and in the private sector. The young people involved in the study and those who had attended any leadership program offered by various entities in the region. As a result, young leaders from the following countries were eligible to participate in the survey: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Lesotho, Malawi, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Kingdom of Eswatini, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It must be noted that leaders from the Democratic Republic of Congo were not involved in the study as we could not find a contact to share our questionnaire. Look at the table below for the distribution of the study’s respondents.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents per country

| Country | Percentage |
|------------|------------|
| Zimbabwe | 20 |
| Zambia | 6,667 |
| eSwathini | 6,667 |
| Lesotho | 6,667 |
| Namibia | 13,333 |
| Malawi | 6,667 |
| Madagascar | 6,667 |
| Botswana | 13,333 |

| | |
|--------------|----|
| South Africa | 20 |
|--------------|----|

Source: Survey data

To collect the data, an online questionnaire was used, and it was sent to the young leaders through the contacts that we had established through the snowball sampling technique. The first person we identified gave us another contact and that chain of contacts kept growing. When the contacts were established then the online questionnaire was through emails. The justification for using a snowball sampling technique as opposed to other random sampling techniques was simply because we were looking for respondents of a certain character for us to achieve the main objective of the study (Johnson 2014; Bhardway 2019).

Profiling the respondents

This section highlights some information about the respondents to the questionnaire. That information is important to the reader to have a picture of the people who gave their opinions in this research and that is also helpful for future research if some other researchers would like to do a comparative study or look at a different group with different characteristics.

The focus group of this research was young people in the SADC region who had attended a leadership program, and they are aged between 18 years and 35 years. Of those interviewed, 56 percent were females and 44.4 percent were males. Looking at their level of education, 44.4 percent had finished their post-degree qualifications, 39.3 percent had finished an undergraduate degree, 7.1 percent had finished a diploma and the remaining 7.1 percent had finished a certificate qualification. No respondent highlighted that they had no qualification at all, or they had high school or primary school education only. Further, glance at the employment status of the respondents, 50 percent of them were employed in the private sector whilst 17.9 percent by government departments. The other 21.4 percent were self-employed whilst 10.7 percent indicated that they were unemployed.

Findings

Experiences of the youth with corruption in the SADC region

All the respondents were asked if they understood public corruption for them to answer the questionnaire. The responses were encouraging as 92.9 percent declared that they fully understood corruption in their respective countries. When asked if they had been asked to pay a bribe by a public official, 67.9 percent of the respondents said that they had never been asked whilst 32.1 percent declared they had been asked to pay for bribe in their home country. The research further pursued with those that had paid a bribe if they had any regrets and 25 percent stated that they regretted not paying for a bribe.

In addition, we asked the respondents if they had ever initiated to pay for a bribe themselves. We found from our sample that 39.3 percent had initiated to pay a bribe themselves whilst the remaining 60.7 percent had never asked or initiated to pay a bribe. When asked why they had initiated paying a bribe, responses ranged from guaranteeing chances of getting a public document like a birth certificate or national identification card, desperation to get a public service like company registration, avoiding an arrest after breaking the law, to fast-track service delivery and finally to get more efficient service. However, given the above picture about young people who are willing to pay a bribe to get public services and getting away with a crime, 67.9 percent of the responses indicated that they would never pay a bribe to get a job that they deserve whilst 10.7 percent said they would pay to get a job. Interesting, there is a 21.4 percent of the sample which indicated that they are not sure whether they would pay or not given the circumstances that they desperately need a job, and they can't get one.

In the context of a government or public tender, we found that 53.6 percent of the sample would never bribe to get a tender. This is worrying given the size of young people who are willing to pay a bribe to get favored over other applicants. It is evidence that 25 percent of our sample are okay with paying a bribe to win a tender whilst 21.4 percent are conflicted as they are not sure if they would pay or not. However, the fact that we find 46.4 percent of young people in the SADC region are willing or not sure about not paying is worrying if these sentiments are to be generalized across all the member states of the SADC region.

On paying tax officials for not declaring income or for not paying sufficient tax, it was encouraging to find quite a stronger voice of those who said they would not bribe but pay. We found that 64.3 percent would never consider paying bribes to tax officials as a solution to non-payment or underpayment of taxes. However, 25 percent said maybe they would pay whilst 10.7 percent indicated that they would pay a bribe to tax officials. There are also some encouraging findings as 60.7 percent of the sample indicated that they would never pay a bribe to the traffic police if they found themselves on the wrong side of the law on the road. They indicated that if found wrong, they would pay for a ticket and take responsibility for their mistake. However, 25 percent indicated that they would

pay a bribe whilst 14.3 percent said they are conflicted. It is a worrying factor to have such a percentage indicating that they are conflicted and if they are implicated, they might pay a bribe and get away unpunished.

SADC youth and their efforts to end corruption.

In this section, young people were asked about what they had done or the action that they had taken against corruption in their home country. We found out that 37 percent of the respondents had not done anything to fight corruption in their countries. On those that had not done anything, there were sentiments that the problem was too deep, corruption is like a culture and some cited that they were not able to do anything, hence they cannot do anything about the corruption situation in their home country.

On the other side, 63 percent of the sampled young people claimed that they had done something to end corruption in their home country. The kind of initiatives that they took part in ranged from voting the incumbent government out, stop paying bribes, adhering to the rule of law, getting involved in awareness campaigns to denounce corruption as well as outlining its devastating effects to the youth and the general population at large. After paying close attention to our findings, we realized that there were three key actions that were being touted as the interventions that young people took. The three broad actions were participating in the voting process, adherence to the rule of law, and advocacy campaigns that denounce corruption through raising awareness in communities.

These findings align with the 2017 publication by Transparency International which argued that paying zero bribes is an instrumental protest and a loud message against corruption. When people refuse to pay bribes, that means they are accountable and responsible, characteristics that are so valuable in the fight against corruption. Further, on the role of voting as a tool to fight corruption, our findings agree with iterations from Roberts (2014), who argued that the youth are not powerless in the fight against corruption as they can reject corruption by voting the incumbent government out. In as much as voting was found in our study as one of the key strategies that young people can use to fight corruption, voter turnout of the youth has been cited as worrisome by the SADC election observers (Kubheka 2019).

Conclusions and recommendations

The objective of this study was to understand the experiences of the youth with corruption and their role in combating it. To achieve the said objective, the study gathered data from youth in leadership across the countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) using an online questionnaire that was distributed via email. Our key findings were that most respondents (46,4 percent) stated that they do not believe that corruption will ever end in their home country whilst the other 32,1 percent believe that maybe it will end. Only 21,4 percent believed that corruption would be eradicated from their home country. Secondly, we found that almost 70 percent of the sampled young had been asked to pay a bribe in their respective countries however, the willingness to pay a bribe was found to be low. Interestingly, some indicated that they regretted now paying the bribe. On the reasons to pay a bribe, there were two main reasons which were to get the service quicker or to jump the queue. When looking at the interventions that are being done by young people in the SADC region, we found three main areas. Interventions from the youth ranged from participating in the voting process in their respective countries, adherence to the rule of law and advocacy campaigns that denounce corruption through raising awareness in communities.

Given the above results, this paper recommends more youth leadership programs in the SADC region so that more and more youth can be aware of ethical and responsible leadership to fight corruption. Secondly, this paper recommends to all stakeholders working with the youth to encourage them to participate in national elections since we found that voting is one of the strategies that can work to eradicate corruption and a higher youth participation in elections will speed up the fight against corruption in the SADC region. Lastly, more youth people should be taught about the importance of following the rule of law since it was found that young people who abide by the law were more vocal in the fight against corruption and they were playing their role in reducing corruption through trying their level best to be on the good side of the law.

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