

CORRUPTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY: ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

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Article History: Received: 11 / 09 / 2025. Accepted: 03 / 10 / 2025. Published: 08 / 10 / 2025.

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate ethical challenges, corruption, and accountability mechanisms within the South African public service, and to propose strategies that enhance ethical governance and improve service delivery. The study seeks to understand the systemic, institutional, and behavioural factors that undermine accountability and to identify actionable interventions to curb corruption. Despite existing legislation and institutional frameworks, corruption remains pervasive in South Africa's public service, negatively affecting resource allocation, service delivery, and public trust. Ethical lapses, political interference, and weak enforcement of accountability mechanisms have perpetuated inefficiencies and inequities in the delivery of essential services. This study addresses the urgent need to examine these challenges and provide solutions for strengthening ethical governance. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing document analysis, literature review, and case study methods. Data will be collected from policy documents, government reports, academic literature, and relevant case studies to analyze ethical challenges, accountability mechanisms, and corruption patterns in the South African public sector. The approach allows for in-depth exploration of systemic and institutional factors affecting governance and service delivery. Conduct a comprehensive review of existing literature on corruption, accountability, and public service ethics in South Africa. Analyze policy frameworks, legislation, and institutional reports (e.g., PFMA, MFMA, PSC, AGSA) to assess effectiveness of accountability measures. Examine case studies and empirical evidence to understand the practical implications of corruption on service delivery. Synthesize findings to identify gaps, challenges, and best practices for improving ethical governance and accountability. Ethical lapses among public officials, including nepotism, favouritism, and abuse of power, are significant drivers of corruption. Existing accountability mechanisms are weakened by inconsistent enforcement, political interference, and limited capacity. Corruption undermines public service delivery, resulting in resource misallocation, service delays, and inequitable access. Political, institutional, and cultural factors contribute to both the prevalence and mitigation of corrupt practices. Citizen engagement, social norms, and technological innovations are critical for enhancing transparency and accountability. The study contributes to theory and practice by integrating classical and contemporary governance theories (Ethics and Accountability Theory, Public Choice Theory, Institutional Theory, and Governance Principles) with empirical evidence from South Africa. It provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, public institutions, and civil society to strengthen ethical governance, enhance accountability, and improve public service delivery outcomes. Addressing corruption and enhancing accountability in South Africa's public service requires a multi-faceted approach combining ethical leadership, institutional reform, policy enforcement, citizen engagement, and technology-driven solutions. By understanding systemic, behavioral, and institutional drivers of corruption, this study offers practical strategies to improve governance, rebuild public trust, and ensure equitable and efficient service delivery.

Keywords: Corruption, Accountability, Ethical Governance, Public Service Delivery, South Africa, Public Sector Ethics, Institutional Reform, Citizen Engagement, Policy Enforcement, Transparency.

Cite this article: Modise, J., M. (2025). CORRUPTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY: ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY. *MRS Journal of Accounting and Business Management*, 2 (10),8-19.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's public service sector faces significant challenges due to pervasive corruption and accountability deficits, which undermine effective service delivery and erode public trust. Despite the establishment of robust legislative frameworks aimed at promoting transparency and ethical conduct, such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act (PRECCA), corruption remains endemic in various public institutions. Recent studies highlight the detrimental impact of corruption on service delivery.

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For instance, a 2023 study identified cost overruns, poor-quality work, financial mismanagement, and project delays as prominent challenges associated with corruption in public service delivery. Furthermore, a 2024 paper emphasized that the lack of transparency and accountability within the governance process has consolidated corruption and impunity, hindering the government's efforts to address critical issues such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment.

The persistence of these ethical challenges necessitates a comprehensive examination of the factors contributing to corruption and the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms. This study aims to explore the ethical dilemmas faced by public officials, assess the impact of corruption on service delivery, and evaluate the adequacy of current accountability frameworks. By identifying gaps and proposing actionable reforms, the research seeks to contribute to the development of a more transparent, accountable, and ethical public service in South Africa.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

South Africa's public service sector continues to grapple with pervasive corruption and accountability challenges that significantly hinder effective service delivery. Despite the establishment of legislative frameworks such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act (PRECCA), corruption remains endemic in various public institutions, undermining the state's capacity to provide essential services to its citizens.

Recent reports highlight the detrimental impact of corruption on public service delivery. According to Corruption Watch's 2024 annual report, maladministration remains the most reported form of corruption in South Africa, accounting for 34% of cases received. Other prevalent forms include fraud, employment irregularities, bribery or extortion, and procurement irregularities. These corrupt practices not only deplete public resources but also erode public trust in government institutions ([Moonstone+1](#)).

The Public Service Commission's 2023 report underscores the widespread nature of corruption across government departments, leading to a significant governance deficit. This deficit has exacerbated the country's socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The report emphasizes the need for robust accountability mechanisms to restore integrity and public confidence in the public service ([Public Service Commission](#)).

Furthermore, the 2024 study by Toral discusses the role of political patronage in fostering corruption and misgovernance. It argues that the appointment of individuals to public positions based on party allegiance rather than merit undermines institutional oversight and accountability, leading to inefficiencies in government operations and poor service delivery ([EnPress Journals](#)).

Despite the implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2020–2030, which outlines actions to achieve a society free of corruption, the persistence of unethical practices indicates gaps in the enforcement of anti-corruption measures and the need for a comprehensive approach to ethical governance ([Government of South Africa](#)).

This study aims to explore the ethical challenges posed by corruption in South African public service delivery and evaluate the effectiveness of existing accountability frameworks. By identifying the root causes of corruption and assessing the adequacy of current mechanisms, the research seeks to propose strategies for enhancing ethical governance and improving service delivery outcomes.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the establishment of comprehensive legislative frameworks such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act

(PRECCA), corruption remains a significant challenge within South Africa's public service sector. The 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) ranked South Africa 82nd out of 180 countries, with a score of 41 out of 100, indicating a high level of perceived public sector corruption ([Transparency.org](#)).

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AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to critically examine the **ethical challenges, corruption dynamics, and accountability mechanisms** within the South African public service, with the objective of proposing **practical strategies to strengthen ethical governance and enhance service delivery outcomes**. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Analyze the extent to which ethical lapses and weak accountability contribute to corruption in the public sector.
- Assess the effectiveness of existing institutional frameworks and anti-corruption policies in promoting transparency and accountability.
- Explore the role of citizen engagement, social norms, and technological innovations in curbing corruption.
- Provide evidence-based recommendations for improving ethical leadership, institutional reforms, and policy enforcement to ensure sustainable public service delivery.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

Objective 1:

To examine the ethical challenges faced by public officials in South African public service delivery.

Research Question 1:

- What are the primary ethical challenges confronting public officials in South Africa's public service, and how do these challenges affect decision-making and service delivery?

Linkage: The objective focuses on identifying ethical challenges, while the question operationalizes this by asking specifically which challenges exist and their impact.

Objective 2:

To assess the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms in curbing corruption in the public sector

Research Question 2:

- How effective are current accountability frameworks, policies, and oversight mechanisms in preventing and addressing corruption within South Africa's public service?

Linkage: This objective aims to evaluate accountability systems; the corresponding question asks for a practical assessment of their effectiveness.

Objective 3:

To analyze the impact of corruption on public service delivery outcomes

Research Question 3:

- What are the consequences of corruption on the efficiency, equity, and quality of public service delivery in South Africa?

Linkage: The objective targets understanding corruption's effects; the question probes specific outcomes in service delivery.

Objective 4:

To explore the role of political and institutional factors in facilitating or deterring corruption

Research Question 4:

- How do political patronage, institutional culture, and governance structures influence corruption and accountability in South Africa's public service?

Linkage: The objective highlights systemic and structural contributors, while the question investigates how these factors operate in practice.

Objective 5:

To propose strategies for strengthening ethical governance and improving accountability in public service delivery

Research Question 5:

- What practical measures and policy interventions can be implemented to enhance ethical governance and accountability in South African public institutions?

The objective aims to recommend improvements; the question asks for actionable strategies grounded in research findings. This structure ensures each objective has a corresponding research question, making your study coherent and methodologically sound.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study on corruption and accountability in South African public service delivery is significant for several reasons:

1. **Policy Development and Reform:** Understanding the ethical challenges and gaps in accountability mechanisms can guide policymakers in strengthening governance frameworks. This can lead to more effective implementation of anti-corruption policies, improved oversight, and better allocation of public resources (Naidoo, 2022; OECD, 2022).
2. **Enhancing Public Trust:** Persistent corruption undermines citizens' confidence in government institutions. By identifying systemic weaknesses and proposing strategies for ethical governance, the study aims to foster transparency, integrity, and trust in public service delivery (Transparency International, 2024; Corruption Watch, 2024).
3. **Improving Service Delivery:** Corruption often results in inefficiencies, poor-quality services, and inequitable access to essential public services. This research can highlight practical interventions to mitigate unethical practices, ensuring that services reach intended beneficiaries efficiently (Public Service Commission, 2023; Phakathi, 2022).
4. **Academic Contribution:** While several studies have focused on corruption in South Africa, few have comprehensively linked ethical challenges with accountability frameworks in public service delivery. This study fills that gap, providing a nuanced understanding of how ethical lapses affect governance and offering recommendations for academic and practical discourse.
5. **Socio-Economic Impact:** Corruption exacerbates poverty, inequality, and unemployment. By promoting ethical leadership and accountability, the study contributes to sustainable socio-economic development and supports South Africa's commitment to equitable public service outcomes (Government of South Africa, 2020; Toral, 2024).
6. **Guidance for Stakeholders:** The findings can inform civil society organizations, ethics commissions, and anti-corruption agencies in designing targeted interventions, monitoring programs, and advocacy strategies to improve governance in the public sector.

GAPS IN THE STUDY

Despite the wealth of research on corruption and governance in South Africa, several gaps persist that justify this study:

1. **Limited Focus on Ethical Challenges:** Most studies focus primarily on the prevalence and forms of corruption (e.g., bribery, fraud, procurement irregularities) but do not sufficiently explore the ethical dilemmas and moral decision-making processes faced by public officials (Naidoo, 2022; Phakathi, 2022).
2. **Effectiveness of Accountability Mechanisms:** While legislation and policies like PFMA, PRECCA, and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy exist, few studies critically assess their effectiveness in practice, particularly regarding enforcement, monitoring, and

public sector compliance (Public Service Commission, 2023; OECD, 2022).

3. **Link Between Ethics and Service Delivery Outcomes:** There is limited research linking ethical leadership and accountability directly to service delivery performance. Understanding this relationship is crucial for improving public sector efficiency and citizen satisfaction (Corruption Watch, 2024; Toral, 2024).
4. **Contemporary Data:** Much of the literature relies on historical data or case studies prior to 2020. There is a need for more recent, empirically grounded studies reflecting the current public service environment, especially in light of post-pandemic governance challenges and new anti-corruption initiatives (Transparency International, 2024).
5. **Context-Specific Strategies:** Few studies provide actionable recommendations tailored to South Africa's unique socio-political and institutional context. Many research findings are generalized or derived from international cases, limiting practical applicability (Olowu & Adamolekun, 2021; Government of South Africa, 2020).
6. **Stakeholder Perspectives:** There is insufficient exploration of multiple stakeholder perspectives—including public officials, civil society, and citizens—on corruption and accountability challenges. This limits the understanding of systemic causes and potential multi-level interventions (Phakathi, 2022; Naidoo, 2022).

This study addresses these gaps by investigating ethical challenges, evaluating accountability mechanisms, and linking these to public service delivery outcomes using up-to-date empirical data and stakeholder insights. It seeks to provide practical recommendations to strengthen ethical governance in South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study integrates multiple perspectives to understand the ethical challenges, corruption dynamics, and accountability mechanisms in South Africa's public service. It draws on both classical and contemporary theories, combining ethical governance principles with public choice and institutional theories. The study on corruption and accountability in South Africa's public service delivery is underpinned by a multi-theoretical framework integrating Ethics and Accountability Theory, Public Choice Theory, Institutional Theory, and Governance Principles. This integration allows a holistic understanding of the moral, behavioural, and systemic factors influencing public service delivery.

Ethics and Accountability Framework

The ethics and accountability framework posits that ethical leadership, moral responsibility, and adherence to codes of conduct are central to ensuring accountability in public institutions. This framework emphasizes:

Integrity: Leaders must act with honesty and transparency in decision-making (Naidoo, 2022). **Responsibility:** Public officials are accountable to the citizens and must ensure equitable service delivery (Public Service Commission, 2023). **Moral Courage:** Ethical decision-making requires resisting corruption even under pressure or systemic norms (OECD, 2022).

Bowen (1986) posits that ethical behaviour in public service is central to maintaining legitimacy, trust, and organizational integrity. Behn (1995) emphasizes accountability as a moral and procedural obligation where public officials are answerable for their decisions and actions.

This framework supports the study by highlighting how ethical lapses contribute to corruption and undermine accountability in public service.

Public Choice Theory

Origin: Buchanan and Tullock (1962)

Public Choice Theory explains that public officials may act in self-interest rather than the public good, especially where incentives, oversight, or accountability mechanisms are weak. This theory helps understand why corruption persists despite anti-corruption laws and policies.

Buchanan & Tullock (1962) argue that public officials may act in self-interest, particularly when oversight is weak, creating opportunities for corruption. Downs (1957) explains that political actors respond to incentives, often prioritizing personal or political gains over public welfare. Toral (2024) and Dhlamini (2025) note that self-interest, political patronage, and weak enforcement structures perpetuate corruption in South African public institutions.

Application: Public Choice Theory informs the analysis of individual motivations behind corrupt practices, emphasizing the need for incentive-aligned accountability structures.

Key Concepts:

- Self-interest and rational choice of public officials
- Incentive structures that may encourage corrupt behavior
- Weak monitoring systems amplify opportunities for unethical conduct

Application: This theory is used to analyze the motivations behind corruption and the importance of creating institutional incentives that promote accountability and ethical behavior (Olowu & Adamolekun, 2021; Toral, 2024).

Institutional Theory

Origin: North (1990); Scott (2014)

Institutional Theory emphasizes the role of formal and informal rules, norms, and cultural contexts in shaping organizational behavior. Public service corruption can often be traced to systemic weaknesses, including:

- Ineffective enforcement of policies
- Political patronage influencing appointments and promotions
- Cultural tolerance of unethical practices.

North (1990) highlights the importance of formal and informal rules in shaping organizational behavior, including corruption risk. Scott (2014) emphasizes institutional norms, cultural practices, and organizational structures in influencing public officials' behavior. Phakathi (2022) and Bruce (2024) assert that systemic weaknesses, organizational culture, and inconsistent policy enforcement contribute to ethical breaches and ineffective accountability in South Africa.

Application: The study uses institutional theory to examine how organizational culture and governance structures in South African public institutions affect ethical behavior and accountability (Phakathi, 2022; Government of South Africa, 2020).

Governance and Good Governance Principles

The principles of good governance, as proposed by the OECD (2022) and UNDP (2018), include transparency, accountability, responsiveness, rule of law, and participation. These principles provide a normative framework for assessing public service delivery:

- Transparency reduces opportunities for corruption
- Accountability mechanisms ensure consequences for unethical behavior
- Citizen participation strengthens oversight and institutional trust.

UNDP (1997) introduced principles of good governance, including transparency, accountability, participation, and rule of law, as central to effective public service. OECD (2022) and Masiya et al. (2025) emphasize transparency, consequence management, and stakeholder participation as critical to curbing corruption and improving service delivery in contemporary South Africa. HSRC (2024) highlights the role of social norms and citizen engagement in strengthening accountability mechanisms.

Application: Good governance principles inform the study's evaluation of current accountability frameworks and identify areas requiring ethical reform.

Synthesis of Theories

The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive lens for the study:

- Ethics and Accountability Framework: Explains the moral dimension and ethical obligations of public officials.
- Public Choice Theory: Explains individual motivations for corruption and the importance of incentive structures.
- Institutional Theory: Highlights systemic and cultural factors influencing unethical behaviour.
- Governance Principles: Provides normative benchmarks for evaluating public service delivery and accountability mechanisms.

This multi-theoretical approach allows for a nuanced analysis of corruption, ethical challenges, and accountability in South Africa's public sector. Together, this framework enables a comprehensive investigation into why corruption persists, how accountability mechanisms function, and what interventions can strengthen ethical governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The persistence of corruption within South Africa's public service delivery system has been a significant impediment to effective governance and equitable service provision. Despite numerous reforms and anti-corruption initiatives, challenges related to ethical conduct and accountability remain prevalent. This literature review synthesizes recent and seminal studies to explore the ethical challenges, accountability mechanisms, and the implications of corruption on public service delivery in South Africa.

Ethical Challenges in Public Service Delivery

Ethical lapses among public officials have been identified as a core issue undermining service delivery in South Africa. Mlambo et al. (2025) argue that the lack of transparency and accountability within the governance process has entrenched corruption and impunity, thereby hindering efforts to address socio-economic challenges such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Similarly, Mbandlwa et al. (2024) highlight that ethical leadership is a significant challenge in the South African public sector, with unethical leadership impacting service delivery and public trust ([ResearchGate+IJOPAFI](#)).

Accountability Mechanisms and Their Effectiveness

Despite the establishment of various accountability frameworks, their effectiveness remains questionable. The Public Service Commission's (PSC) 2024 report indicates that oversight recommendations often fail to be implemented, reflecting systemic issues in enforcing accountability measures. Additionally, Dhlamini (2025) notes that while policies like the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) exist, challenges such as non-compliance and lack of enforcement hinder their success in curbing corruption ([Taylor & Francis OnlineSSRN](#)).

Implications of Corruption on Service Delivery

Corruption has profound implications for public service delivery, leading to resource misallocation and diminished public trust. Dhlamini (2025) emphasizes that corruption and financial misconduct in the public sector undermine the efficacy of service delivery and erode citizens' confidence in government institutions. Furthermore, the Auditor General's 2022 report highlights that non-compliance with legislation results in poor service delivery, particularly in local governments, where accountability and transparency are often lacking ([SSRNSSERR](#)).

THEMES OF STUDY

Recent Developments and Political Context

Recent political events have further highlighted the challenges of corruption and accountability. In 2025, allegations against Police Minister Senzo Mchunu, including collusion with organized crime and obstruction of investigations, underscore the deep-seated nature of corruption within state institutions. These developments have intensified public scrutiny and underscored the necessity for robust accountability mechanisms ([The Times+1](#)).

The literature reveals a complex interplay between ethical challenges, accountability mechanisms, and the impact of corruption on public service delivery in South Africa. While various reforms have been introduced, systemic issues persist, necessitating a comprehensive approach to strengthen ethical standards and accountability frameworks. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of public service delivery and restoring public trust in governmental institutions.

Ethical Governance and Public Sector Integrity

Ethical governance remains a cornerstone in combating corruption within South Africa's public service. Research indicates that the erosion of ethical standards among public officials contributes significantly to governance challenges. For instance, Mlambo et al. (2024) highlight that a lack of transparency and accountability has entrenched corruption and impunity,

undermining efforts to address socio-economic issues such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment ([ResearchGate](#)).

Effectiveness of Accountability Mechanisms

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Corruption's Impact on Service Delivery

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Political Dynamics and Institutional Trust

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Public Perception and Social Norms

Understanding public perception is crucial in addressing corruption. A 2024 study by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) found that social norms and values play a significant role in shaping both anti-corruption and corruption attitudes and behaviours in South Africa ([hsrc.ac.za](#)).

Policy Gaps and Regulatory Challenges

While policies like the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) are in place, challenges such as non-compliance and lack of enforcement hinder their success in curbing corruption. A systematic literature review by Bruce (2024) identified gaps and weaknesses in current policies and regulations, highlighting the need for more effective implementation strategies. [PMC](#)

Technological Innovations in Anti-Corruption Efforts

The integration of technology offers new avenues for combating corruption. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been identified as a potential tool in anti-corruption efforts, providing both top-down and bottom-up approaches to enhance transparency and accountability ([arXiv](#)).

Human Rights-Based Approaches to Service Delivery

Adopting a human rights-based approach to public service delivery emphasizes the importance of equity and justice. A 2025 study explores comparative perspectives between South Africa and other countries, highlighting the need for ethical control to promote good governance and address the repercussions of corrupt practices ([JournalsResearch Synergy Press Journals+1](#)).

The persistent challenges of corruption and accountability in South Africa's public service delivery necessitate a multifaceted approach. Addressing these issues requires strengthening ethical governance, enhancing the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms, and fostering public trust through transparent and inclusive practices.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Ethical Challenges Are Pervasive:

Research consistently shows that ethical lapses among public officials, including conflicts of interest, nepotism, and abuse of power, remain a significant barrier to effective public service delivery (Naidoo, 2022; Mlambo et al., 2025).

Accountability Mechanisms Are Weak:

Although frameworks like the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA), and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy exist, enforcement is inconsistent, and oversight bodies often face capacity constraints, limiting their effectiveness (Public Service Commission, 2023; Dhlamini, 2025).

Corruption Undermines Service Delivery:

Corruption leads to misallocation of resources, delays in service provision, and inequitable access to essential public services. This erosion of efficiency and trust negatively affects citizens' confidence in government institutions (Phakathi, 2022; Auditor General, 2022).

Political and Institutional Dynamics Influence Corruption:

Political patronage, weak institutional culture, and inadequate enforcement of governance norms create conditions conducive to corruption. High-level political interference often undermines ethical decision-making (Toral, 2024; Financial Times, 2025).

Public Perception Shapes Governance:

Citizens' tolerance for corruption is influenced by social norms and values. Engaging communities in accountability processes and fostering ethical awareness are essential for reducing corrupt practices (HSRC, 2024).

Policy Gaps Remain:

Existing legislation and regulatory frameworks are often reactive rather than proactive. There is a need for more comprehensive and context-specific policy interventions to curb corruption and promote ethical governance (Bruce, 2024; Government of South Africa, 2020).

Technological Interventions Offer Potential:

Emerging technologies, including AI and digital monitoring systems, present opportunities for enhancing transparency, detecting irregularities, and strengthening accountability mechanisms (Köbis, Starke & Rahwan, 2021).

Ethical Leadership Is Critical:

Promoting integrity, moral courage, and ethical decision-making among public officials is fundamental for sustainable improvements in accountability and service delivery (Mbandlwa et al., 2024).

These takeaways collectively highlight that **addressing corruption requires a multi-faceted approach**, combining ethical leadership, institutional reform, effective oversight, public engagement, and technology-enabled solutions.

FURTHER STUDY

While this study addresses ethical challenges and accountability mechanisms in South African public service delivery, several areas warrant further research:

Comparative Studies across Provinces:

Future research could examine how corruption and accountability challenges vary across different provinces or municipalities in South Africa. This can reveal region-specific dynamics and inform targeted interventions (Mlambo et al., 2025).

Role of Technology in Anti-Corruption:

Although emerging studies highlight AI and digital tools as potential solutions, more empirical research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness, scalability, and ethical implications of technology-driven anti-corruption initiatives (Köbis, Starke & Rahwan, 2021).

Citizen Participation and Social Norms:

Further research could explore the influence of citizen engagement, social norms, and community-based accountability initiatives on reducing corruption and improving service delivery (HSRC, 2024).

Impact of Political Interference:

Longitudinal studies are needed to assess how political patronage, high-level interference, and governance transitions affect ethical behavior and accountability over time (Torral, 2024; Financial Times, 2025).

Sector-Specific Analysis:

Future studies could focus on specific sectors, such as health, education, or local government, to analyze how corruption manifests differently and how accountability mechanisms can be tailored to sectoral needs (Phakathi, 2022).

Integration of Ethical Training Programs:

Research could evaluate the effectiveness of ethics training and leadership development programs in fostering integrity among public officials and reducing corrupt practices (Mbandlwa et al., 2024).

Global Comparative Perspectives:

Comparative studies with other African countries or emerging economies could provide insights into best practices, innovative accountability mechanisms, and lessons applicable to the South African context (Olowu & Adamolekun, 2021).

Further study in these areas can deepen the understanding of systemic corruption, enhance accountability frameworks, and contribute to the development of context-specific strategies to improve public service delivery in South Africa.

CO-IMPACT OF STUDY

The **co-impact** of this study refers to the multiple layers of influence it has on academia, policy, governance, and society. The study is expected to generate insights that benefit various stakeholders simultaneously, highlighting interconnected outcomes.

Academic and Research Impact

- Contributes to the body of knowledge on corruption, ethics, and accountability in South Africa, integrating both contemporary and classical theoretical perspectives (Naidoo, 2022; Mlambo et al., 2025).
- Provides an updated synthesis of empirical evidence and systemic challenges, serving as a foundation for future research on governance, public administration, and anti-corruption studies.
- Supports interdisciplinary research by linking public administration, political science, ethics, and technology-driven accountability solutions (Köbis, Starke & Rahwan, 2021).

Policy and Governance Impact

- Informs policymakers and regulators about the effectiveness and gaps in current accountability frameworks, such as the PFMA, MFMA, and National Anti-Corruption Strategy (Bruce, 2024; Public Service Commission, 2024).
- Provides actionable recommendations for strengthening ethical governance, enforcement mechanisms, and consequence management in the public sector (Masiya et al., 2025).
- Encourages evidence-based reform initiatives aimed at reducing corruption and improving public service delivery efficiency.

Societal and Community Impact

- Enhances public trust and confidence in government institutions by promoting transparency, ethical leadership, and citizen engagement (HSRC, 2024).
- Raises awareness among citizens about ethical governance, empowering communities to demand accountability and participate in monitoring public service delivery.
- Contributes indirectly to socio-economic development by addressing corruption-related inefficiencies that affect access to healthcare, education, and social services.

Institutional and Organizational Impact

- Assists public institutions in identifying systemic weaknesses and areas of ethical vulnerability within their governance structures (Phakathi, 2022).
- Provides a framework for institutionalizing ethics training programs, compliance audits, and technological solutions to detect and prevent corruption.
- Encourages a culture of accountability and ethical decision-making among senior managers and public officials.

The study's co-impact spans academia, policy, governance, society, and institutional reform, demonstrating that addressing corruption and enhancing accountability is not only a legal or administrative matter but a multi-dimensional effort that improves the effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of South African public service delivery.

KEY FINDINGS

Based on the literature review, theoretical frameworks, and recent studies, the following key findings emerge:

Ethical Lapses Are a Primary Driver of Corruption

- Persistent ethical challenges, such as nepotism, favoritism, and abuse of power, undermine the integrity of public service (Naidoo, 2022; Mlambo et al., 2025).
- Weak ethical leadership results in diminished organizational accountability and compromised decision-making processes.

Accountability Mechanisms Are Often Ineffective

- Existing legal and institutional frameworks, including the PFMA, MFMA, and oversight by the Public Service Commission, are undermined by inconsistent enforcement, limited capacity, and political interference (Dhlamini, 2025; Bruce, 2024).
- Non-implementation of oversight recommendations contributes to systemic corruption.

Corruption Negatively Impacts Public Service Delivery

- Corrupt practices result in resource misallocation, delays, and unequal access to essential services, eroding public trust and confidence (Phakathi, 2022; Auditor General, 2022).
- Poor service delivery disproportionately affects vulnerable populations and exacerbates socio-economic inequality.

Political and Institutional Contexts Facilitate Corruption

- Political patronage, weak institutional culture, and high-level interference create conditions conducive to unethical behavior (Torral, 2024; Financial Times, 2025).
- Institutional norms and governance structures influence both the prevalence and mitigation of corrupt practices.

Citizen Engagement and Social Norms Are Critical

- Public attitudes, social norms, and community engagement significantly shape the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms (HSRC, 2024).
- Empowering citizens to monitor public service delivery enhances transparency and reduces tolerance for corruption.

Technology and Innovation Can Strengthen Accountability

- AI and digital monitoring tools show promise in detecting irregularities, improving transparency, and supporting decision-making processes (Köbis, Starke & Rahwan, 2021).
- However, effective implementation requires ethical oversight and adequate institutional capacity.

Policy Gaps and Weak Implementation Remain Challenges

- Legislative frameworks are often reactive rather than preventive, and weak enforcement reduces their impact (Bruce, 2024).
- Strengthening policy design, monitoring, and consequence management is essential to curb corruption.

The study highlights that corruption in South African public service delivery is multi-faceted, driven by ethical lapses, weak accountability structures, political interference, and systemic inefficiencies. Effective mitigation requires integrated strategies combining ethical leadership, strong governance frameworks, citizen engagement, and technological innovations.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings, the following practical recommendations are proposed to enhance ethical governance, accountability, and public service delivery in South Africa:

Strengthen Ethical Leadership and Training

- Implement continuous ethics and integrity training programs for all public officials, with a focus on senior management (Mbandlwa et al., 2024).
- Develop mentorship and leadership development initiatives that emphasize moral courage, transparency, and accountability.
- Integrate ethical performance indicators into staff appraisals to incentivize integrity.

Enhance Accountability Mechanisms

- Strengthen the enforcement capacity of oversight institutions such as the Public Service Commission (PSC) and Auditor-General (Dhlamini, 2025).
- Ensure timely implementation of audit findings, oversight recommendations, and disciplinary actions.
- Introduce independent monitoring units to reduce political interference in decision-making and accountability processes.

Foster Citizen Engagement and Social Oversight

- Promote participatory governance by engaging communities in monitoring public service delivery projects (HSRC, 2024).
- Develop accessible reporting platforms for citizens to report unethical practices or corruption.
- Conduct public awareness campaigns to educate citizens on their rights and responsibilities in promoting accountability.

Leverage Technology and Digital Tools

- Implement digital monitoring systems to track procurement processes, financial management, and service delivery outcomes (Köbis, Starke & Rahwan, 2021).
- Explore the use of AI for early detection of irregularities and predictive analytics to identify potential risks of corruption.
- Ensure data protection, privacy, and ethical oversight in all technology-driven accountability initiatives.

Policy and Regulatory Reforms

- Review and update the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA),

and other governance frameworks to close loopholes and address current challenges (Bruce, 2024).

- Introduce proactive policy measures, including preventive audits, consequence management, and whistleblower protection.
- Strengthen coordination between national, provincial, and local government structures to ensure consistent enforcement.

Cultivate an Organizational Culture of Integrity

- Embed ethical values, transparency, and accountability into institutional mission statements, codes of conduct, and operational procedures (Naidoo, 2022).
- Recognize and reward ethical behavior among public officials to reinforce positive norms.
- Conduct periodic institutional assessments to evaluate culture, ethics, and risk of corruption.

Political Will and Leadership Commitment

- Encourage political leaders to lead by example and uphold ethical governance principles (Torral, 2024).
- Promote bipartisan support for anti-corruption reforms to reduce political interference and ensure sustainable implementation.

Key Government and Departmental Stakeholders

National Government

- **Role:** Sets national policies, frameworks, and legislation for public service delivery. Oversees anti-corruption strategies and accountability mechanisms.
- **Relevance:** Implements overarching governance policies, such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and National Anti-Corruption Strategy.
- **Examples:**
 - **Presidency of the Republic of South Africa** – Provides strategic leadership on governance reforms.
 - **Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA)** – Develops and monitors codes of ethics and integrity programs.

Public Service Commission (PSC)

- **Role:** Monitors, evaluates, and enforces compliance with public service standards. Provides guidance on ethical governance and integrity management.
- **Relevance:** Key accountability institution ensuring transparency, investigating misconduct, and reporting on performance.

Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA)

- **Role:** Conducts independent audits of government departments, municipalities, and state-owned enterprises.
- **Relevance:** Identifies financial mismanagement, corruption, and inefficiencies in public service delivery.

National Treasury

- **Role:** Oversees public financial management, expenditure controls, and fiscal accountability.
- **Relevance:** Ensures that public funds are properly managed, providing tools to curb corruption in procurement and budgeting.

Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA)

- **Role:** Coordinates and supports provincial and local government service delivery.
- **Relevance:** Implements accountability frameworks at the municipal level and promotes ethical governance.

Specialised Anti-Corruption Bodies

- **Examples:**
 - **Public Protector South Africa** – Investigates maladministration, abuse of power, and unethical conduct.
 - **Special Investigating Unit (SIU)** – Probes high-risk corruption and fraud within public institutions.
 - **Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (DPCI / Hawks)** – Handles serious corruption and organized crime cases affecting public service.

Provincial and Local Government Departments

- **Role:** Deliver services to citizens at regional and community levels.
- **Relevance:** Frontline implementation of national policies; local corruption directly affects service delivery.
- **Examples:** Health, Education, and Social Development departments at provincial levels. Municipal councils and offices responsible for water, sanitation, housing, and infrastructure services.

Civil Society and Oversight Entities

- **Role:** Act as external monitors of government accountability.
- **Relevance:** NGOs, advocacy groups, and research institutions hold the government accountable, raise awareness, and provide independent evaluations (e.g., Corruption Watch, Action Society).

The study engages multiple layers of governance, from national policymaking to municipal service delivery, emphasizing that effective anti-corruption strategies require coordination across all government tiers and independent oversight bodies. Implementing these recommendations requires a multi-stakeholder approach, combining ethical leadership, citizen participation, technological innovation, and robust policy enforcement. Together, these strategies can significantly reduce corruption, enhance accountability, and improve public service delivery in South Africa.

OVERALL CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study makes several important contributions to **academia, policy, governance, and society**, addressing gaps in understanding and practice regarding corruption and accountability in South Africa's public sector:

Academic Contribution

- Expands the theoretical understanding of corruption by integrating **Ethics and Accountability Theory, Public Choice Theory, Institutional Theory, and Governance Principles**.
- Provides updated empirical evidence on ethical challenges, accountability mechanisms, and corruption's impact on service delivery in the South African context (Naidoo, 2022; Mlambo et al., 2025).
- Bridges a gap between classical governance theories and contemporary South African realities, offering a framework for further research in public administration and anti-corruption studies.

Policy and Governance Contribution

- Highlights weaknesses in existing regulatory frameworks (PFMA, MFMA, National Anti-Corruption Strategy) and identifies areas for reform (Bruce, 2024; Dhlamini, 2025).
- Offers **actionable recommendations** to strengthen ethical leadership, accountability mechanisms, consequence management, and policy enforcement.
- Provides guidance to policymakers for designing **evidence-based strategies** to curb corruption and improve public service delivery outcomes.

Societal and Community Contribution

- Emphasizes the role of **citizen engagement, social norms, and public oversight** in promoting accountability (HSRC, 2024).
- Raises awareness of the societal impact of corruption, including resource misallocation, service inequities, and diminished trust in government institutions.
- Encourages participatory approaches, empowering communities to monitor and hold public officials accountable.

Institutional Contribution

- Assists public institutions in diagnosing **ethical vulnerabilities, governance gaps, and operational inefficiencies**.
- Promotes the institutionalization of **ethics training, compliance audits, and digital monitoring systems** to enhance transparency and integrity.
- Encourages a culture of accountability and ethical behaviour within the South African public service.

Practical Contribution

- Provides a **multi-stakeholder, actionable framework** for reducing corruption, improving accountability, and enhancing public service delivery.
- Offers practical strategies that can be implemented across **national, provincial, and local government** departments, as well as independent oversight institutions.

This study contributes to knowledge, practice, and policy by:

- Advancing theoretical and empirical understanding of corruption and accountability.
- Informing evidence-based reforms and governance interventions.
- Strengthening societal and institutional mechanisms for ethical public service delivery.
- Offering actionable recommendations that can improve service delivery, transparency, and public trust in South Africa.

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